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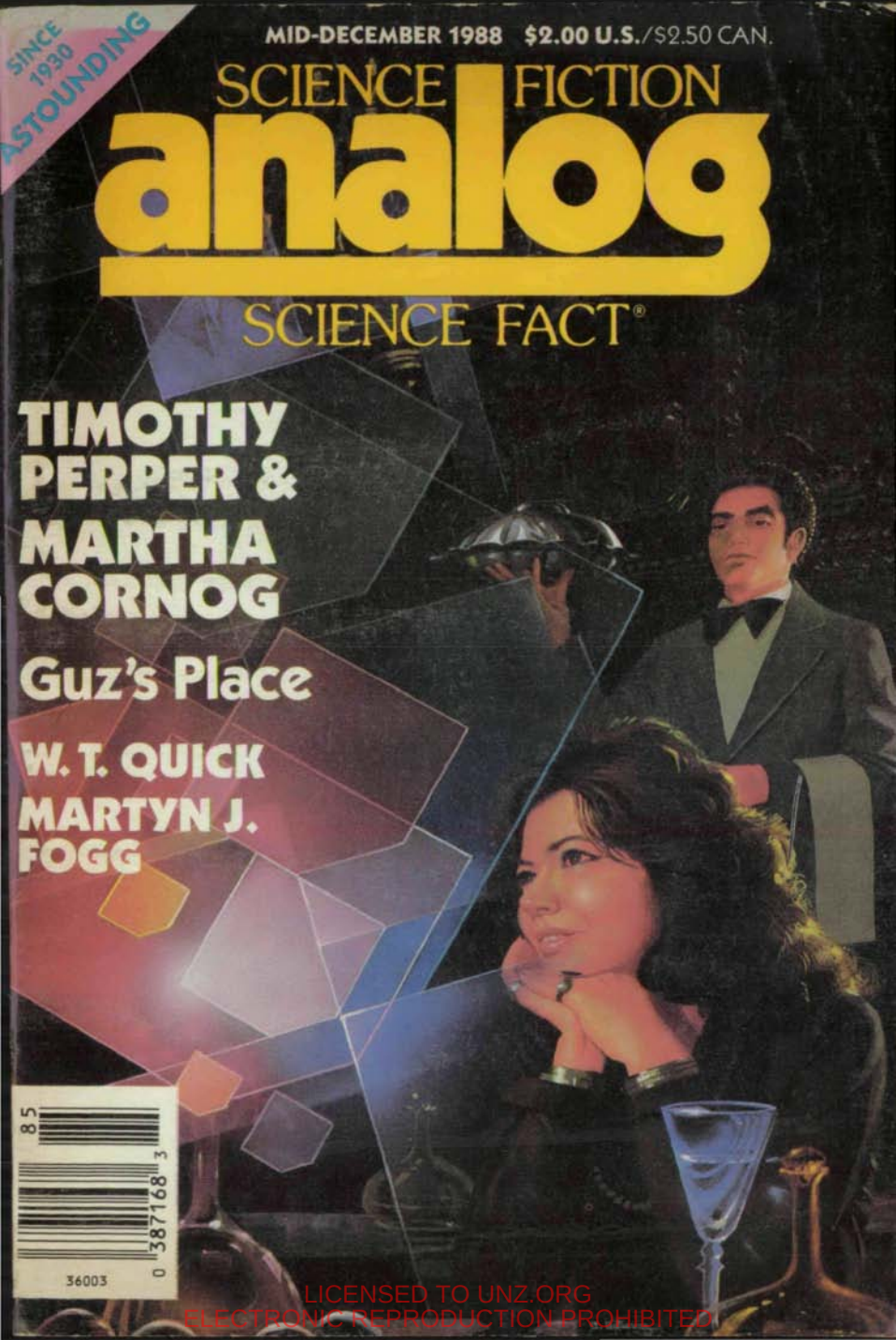

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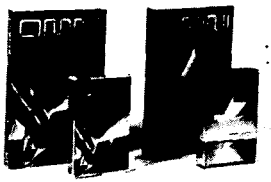

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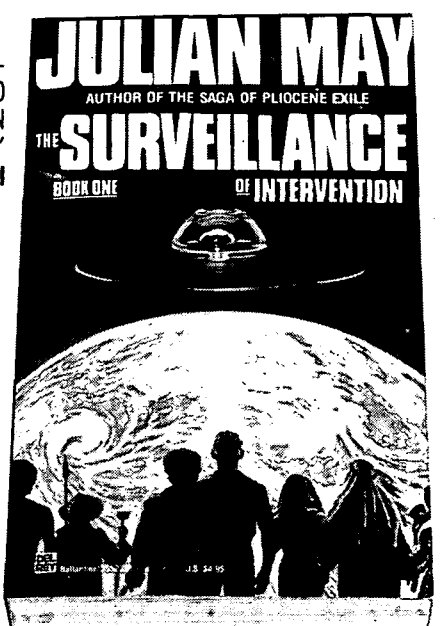

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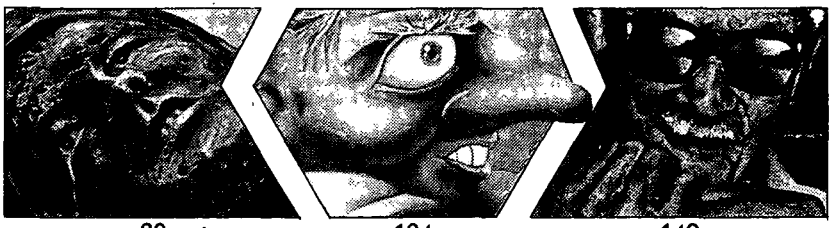

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Editorial

SERIALS

Stanley Schmidt

Recently, after a long spell of receiving almost no submissions of novels for possible serialization in *Analog*, I found on my doorstep a large box containing not one, but four. All were complete manuscripts; all were by authors well-known and highly regarded by me and many of you; and I expected to have a hard time deciding which one to buy. As it turned out, I did in fact like all of them—but decided not to serialize any of them.

Why would I do such a thing?

That question might be viewed as a corollary of a more general question that comes up from time to time, right here in "Brass Tacks," at conventions, or wherever else a reader with a strong opinion on the subject happens to catch me. It has long been true that many readers have had strong opinions on serials, either loving them or hating them; but it occurred to me, while writing my last apologetic note about the four mentioned above, that this might be a good time to consider the subject at greater length than a "Brass Tacks" reply permits—if only because some of the factors to be considered in deciding whether and when to serialize have changed over the years.

The old familiar arguments are not likely to surprise you. In favor of serials (from a reader's point of view) there is the fact that many good science-fictional ideas are so meaty, so full of implications, that only a novel gives ample room to explore them in a satisfying way. There is evidence for this in the readers' own opinions as expressed in the earlier days of this magazine. For many years "The Analytical Laboratory," our reader preference poll, was

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conducted on a monthly rather than an annual basis. Instead of ranking their favorites among all the stories published in a particular length range during a given year, readers were asked to rank, in order of their preference, all stories in each issue, without regard to length. The results showed a suspiciously strong correlation between length and popularity. Long stories usually beat out shorter ones, and if a serial installment was present, it tended to beat out everything else. That fact strongly suggested that readers *liked* serials—or at least the kinds of stories that were serialized.

Whether they particularly liked getting them in serial *form* might be another question. There have always been readers who complained about having to wait a month between one part of a story and the next or, alternatively, to save issues until all had arrived to be able to read the story straight through. (Some readers have even claimed that collecting all the issues is difficult because they tend to disappear, but this seems to me not so much a problem with serials as with those readers' personal filing habits.) Readers have also objected, quite justifiably, to getting "watered-down" serial versions of novels which later appeared as books. I'm told that this has actually been common practice in some other publications, but *not* in *Analog*. Our serials have almost always been complete and identical to their book counterparts, where book counterparts existed—except that the serials have come with far more illustrations, some of them memorable in themselves, than the books.

There is another consideration which seems to me more important than any of these, and more important now than ever before. Let me approach it obliquely, via something which might at first glance seem unrelated—but isn't.

Recently, I had lunch with a talented young writer who has been spending much of his recent time in an academic environment. Since I've spent a lot of time there myself, in a variety of capacities, we got to comparing notes. We both admittted to having been somewhat disillusioned by the nature of some of the research we saw being done in academic circles—partly because it seemed to be done more because the researcher needed more publications for his resumé than because the work was intrinsically highly worthwhile. He pointed out that even when the research topic *was* particularly interesting and valuable, some researchers tended to "milk" it by publishing slightly different reports of the same work in many different journals. I remarked that this was not only a waste of good trees and library space, but not particularly useful from the standpoint of advancing the author's field because any competent researcher would be keeping an eye on all likely sources, and would probably catch any one of the multiple reports and therefore not need the others.

There is a somewhat analogous situation with books and serials. Why, readers have asked, should we serialize a story which will soon be available in book form? Wouldn't the space be better used to publish shorter stories which might not otherwise be published at all?

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Quite often, I agree that it would—and that's why I suspect you'll find, if you bother to count, that *Analog* has in recent years been tending to use rather fewer serials and more issues containing no serial installments. In the not too distant past, very few science fiction novels were published *except* as magazine serials. In those days, it didn't really matter if readers would have preferred to get their novels in book form; they weren't available that way, so if they wanted to read them at all, they had to read them as serials. So they did, and were grateful for the opportunity.

In recent years, that situation has changed dramatically. Now there are far more books than magazines being published in this field, and most of those books are novels. Therefore magazine space is a precious commodity as an outlet for work which might not other-

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have one. In science fiction, as
ı as in any scholarly field of re-
:h, I think it is more important to
ers, and to the general health of the
, to make as many worthwhile piec-
f work as possible available in at
one form, than to provide multiple
:ts for any one piece. (There are,
ourse, other groups within the field
:h have slightly different motiva-
s than readers. Writers, for exam-
always appreciate the opportunity
e paid twice for the same story—but
also appreciate the opportunity to
aid even once. A writer getting extra
for serial rights to a novel already
as a book may be making it im-
ible for some other writer to be paid
ı once for an equally impressive
y. Publishers sometimes like serials
use they think that if readers are
ı about installment one they'll be
to buy installments two, three, and
—but if enough readers find the
ole concept of serials distasteful, that
ivation can backfire.)

o why publish serials at all, given
new shape of the field? As I've al-
dy said, I think I'm doing it less,
rely because of considerations like
se I've been talking about. Of the
r potential serials that led me to bring
subject up, all four already had book
tracts. Some were already scheduled
publication so early that it would
e been difficult or impossible to se-
ize them before the books came out.
was a fine story, but even the author
bted that it was the right *kind* of story
Analog. Another was something that
adn't even realized existed until I
started editing: a good book that would not be as good a serial. (A serial must break into pieces in such a way that a reader who reads installments as they come receives a certain satisfaction from each one, yet remains eager to dive into the next a month later, and not all good books do that.) But the most important consideration of all was that those novels came in at a time when I was getting lots of good novelettes and novellas. Since I can buy only up to the capacity of the magazine, I can't always buy everything that I like. In this case, it seemed more important to provide a primary (and possibly only) outlet for the novelettes and novellas than to provide a secondary outlet for the novels.

Nevertheless, I do still *sometimes* buy and publish serials, and will probably continue to do so for the foreseeable future. They aren't the right choice as often as they used to be, but sometimes, I think, they are, for several possible reasons. For instance:

1. While many serials will eventually appear as books, and often arrive on my desk with book publication dates already attached, not *all* do. My own first novel, *The Sins of the Fathers*, for instance, *eventually* appeared as a book, but at the time Ben Bova bought it as an *Analog* serial, I had no assurance that it would. It was his expressed interest in the idea, and his willingness to take a chance on it, that for the first time gave me the nerve to tackle a writing project as big as a novel. In the years I've been editing, we have serialized several novels which were well received by our readers but for one reason or

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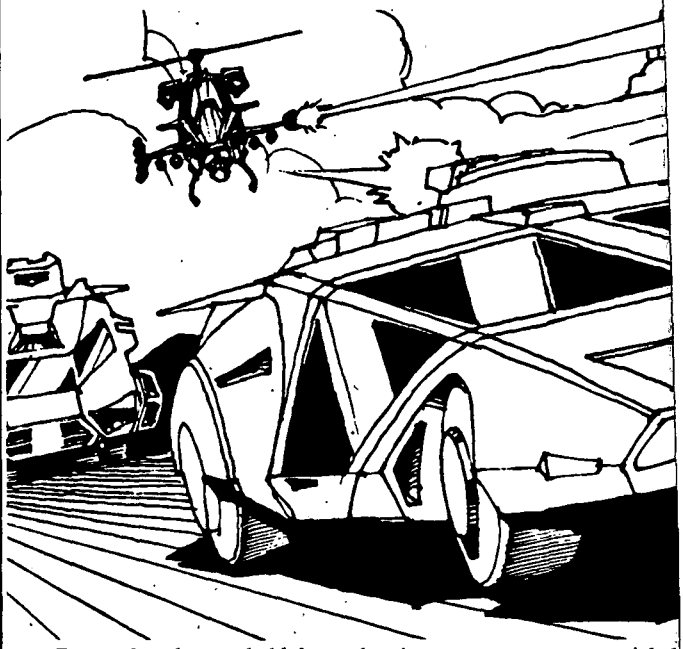

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SPECTRA

BANTAM

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another never (as of my latest knowledge) appeared in book form. Many of you wrote to tell us how much you enjoyed Bob Buckley's *World in the Clouds*, Dean McLaughlin's *Dawn*, and Andrew Offutt and Richard Lyon's *Rails Across the Galaxy*—but the evidence to date is that if we hadn't serialized them, you wouldn't have got to read them.

2. Both books and magazines have their own practical (and occasionally impractical) constraints on what lengths of stories they want or are able to publish. Short novels, say around 40,000 words, make book publishers uncomfortable because they don't think readers will buy something that looks "skimpy." But stories of that length are not necessarily skimpy in content, and they work just fine as two-part serials. Last year we ran Michael F. Flynn's *In the Country of the Blind*, and our mail made it clear that a large percentage of you loved it. But I suspect he's going to have trouble selling it as a book (unless he expands it), not because of any lack of quality, but simply because it's of a size that's hard to market.

3. Sometimes a story comes along which seems so uncommonly well attuned to the *Analog* audience that I think you'll want to see it here even if I do know you'll soon be able to buy it elsewhere. These include things like Donald Kingsbury's *Courtship Rite*, Robert L. Forward's *Rocheworld*, Larry Niven's *The Integral Trees*, and Charles Sheffield's *Between the Strokes of Night*. Those I'll buy even if they do arrive already in possession of a book contract—provided I don't find them in competition with something I like even better that doesn't.

4. Since most of you are reading science fiction primarily for fun rather than as part of your job, you're not as likely as a professional researcher to maintain a thorough literature search of everything that appears in the field. Therefore you may not always see everything that comes out in places other than the ones you read regularly—and even if you do, you may be limited in how much money you can or want to spend on extras. In some cases, this fact adds extra support to point three as a reason for buying serials.

5. Good manuscripts of any particular type do not flow in at a constant, never-changing rate. Just as there are periods when I get more good short stories, novellettes, and novellas than I have room for, there are also occasional "dry spells" in which I see very few that meet the standards both you and I expect of *Analog*. In such a case, I'd rather give you a serialized novel that you'll like, even if you'll later be able to get it elsewhere, than a lot of short pieces that you won't.

The basic, overriding principle in all cases is that I'll try to give you the best stories I can find—that is, the ones I think most of you will like best —regardless of length. Other things being equal, I will choose a piece that you are unlikely to see otherwise over one that is sure to be available elsewhere. This principle will tend, in general, to lead to fewer serials and more issues without

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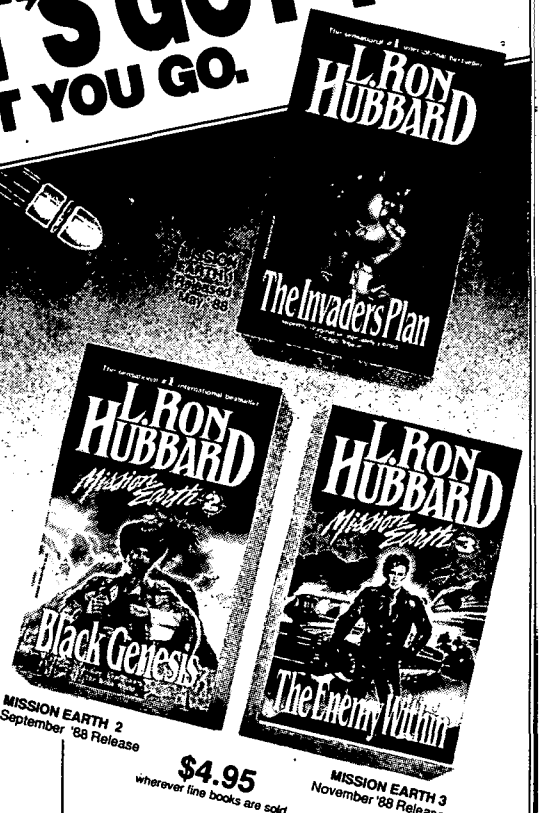

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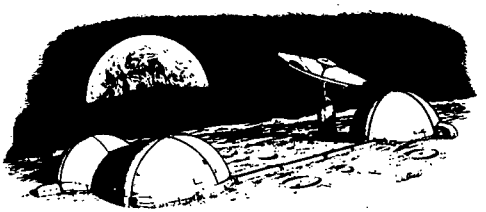
serials. But other things are not always equal, and serials will probably continue to be good things to do under some conditions, for one or more of the reasons above. If you happen to be one of those readers who doesn't like them, your best chance to get me to cut back even further on them is to write me a shorter piece that's so irresistible that I want to use it instead.

As for longer ones . . .

It's ironic that writers sometimes ask me, "Do I have to have a book contract before you'll consider my book for serialization?" Not only do you not have to, it's a minor strike against you if you do. Having a book contract doesn't necessarily mean I *won't* use your story—but if I'm offered another that doesn't have one, and that I like at least as well, I'd rather use that. Good stories come in all lengths, and not all of them will appeal to all editors. But in the long run it's best for all of us, readers and writers alike, to get the maximum possible number of the best possible pieces before the public. ■



●*Author's rule:* Don't pick an important problem, don't challenge existing beliefs, don't obtain surprising results, and don't write clearly.

J.S. Armstrong

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John Hradsky

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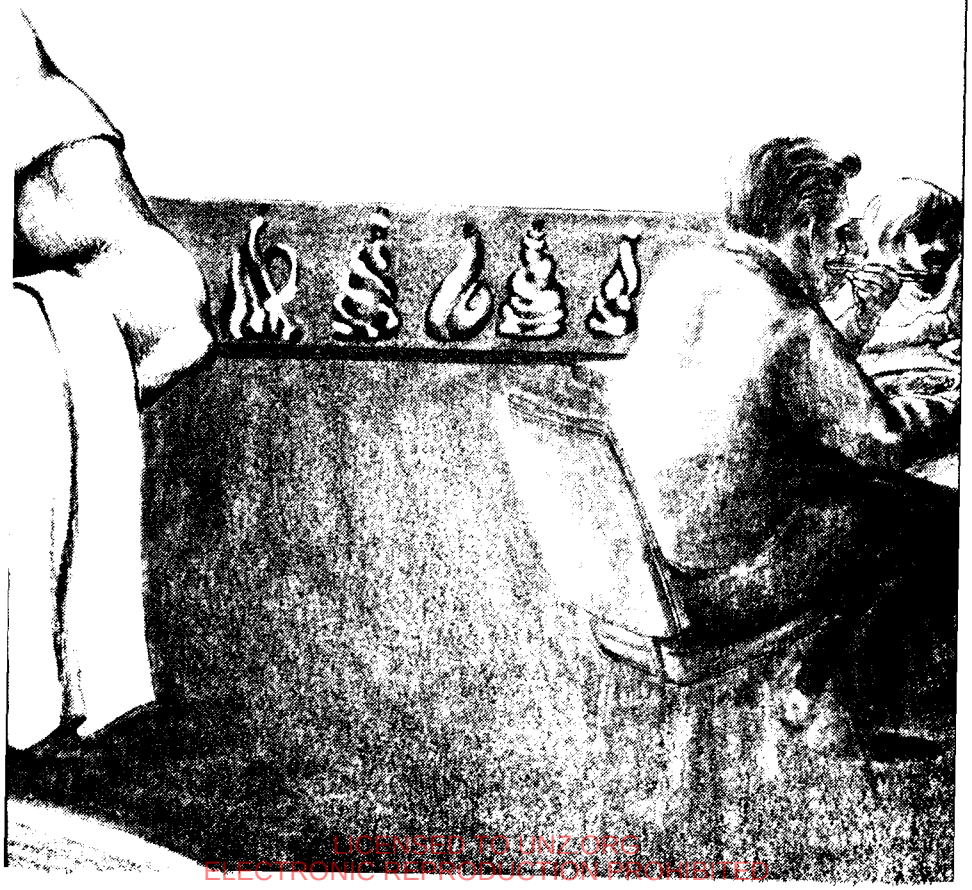
GUZ'S PLACE

Timothy Perper
and Martha Cornog

Every neighborhood should have a place like this.
Does yours? Are you *sure*?



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Of course, the art students were the first to notice that the old Koon Chun Chief Treasure Restaurant was reopening. They had liked the place—you know, good cheap food—but it had closed a year and a half ago.

Now there was this hand-lettered sign in the window: "Soon to Reopen. New Management. Guz's Place. Great Foreign Cuisine." And, in smaller writing, "Look for Bargain Coupons."

"All *right*," the students thought. "More moo goo gai pan!"

Then, the great day. Guz—whoever *he* was—put up red, white, and blue party bunting and a sign that read, "Grand Opening. Guz's Place."

"Grand opening it is," they said —Jeff, Sue, Arky, Timbo, Katby, all the old Koon Chun regulars. Not that the Koon Chun Chief Treasure Restaurant had been the plushiest place around—the projects on one side, boarded up stores everywhere—but it was only two blocks from the art school, and who said *that* was plush either?

"Look, what the hell," said Katby. "Old Guz needs *somebody* to eat moo goo gai pan at his grand opening. Let's all go."

So they did.

Same place inside, even if Guz had put in a new floor and some new tables and chairs. But the menu was all new—no moo goo gai pan, but other things, like Steak with Vuzd Sauce, Plesht Tidbits, Varjinian Duck, Pickled Zbod.

"*OK* . . ." they said. "Who knows? We'll try some."

Jeff and Sue ordered the Steak with Vuzd Sauce, $8.95, the most expensive item on the menu. But Sue had a job now, and Jeff was getting his portfolio together. So they had *some* money.

Of course, everyone still thought of Guz's Place as Chinese (honorary Chinese, maybe, since there was nothing Chinese on the menu at all, not even moo goo gai pan), so they all shared their dishes. Katby thought the vuzd sauce was too tawny, her word, it turned out, for a certain kind of faintly rotten flavor. On the other hand, Jeff liked it a lot (Sue less so), and Arky and Timbo loved it. They ordered the Plesht Tidbits too, a motley collection of little bits and pieces of flavored meat and vegetables, some spicy, some tangy, some sweet, some "tawny." Of course, they were cooked beyond recognition, although Katby thought she had found some carrots. But the Varjinian Duck everyone loved. The skin was crunchy, almost ginger-like, while the meat was tender, with just enough flavoring in the sauce.

The waiter was a bit odd, though. He looked faintly like Peter Lorre in *M*, so they nicknamed him after the actor. He spoke with an accent that no one could place exactly. The words were right, but his voice was flat, uninflected, hardly dropping at the ends of sentences. Must be Transylvanian, they decided. Nonetheless, the service was attentive and polite. The Varjinian Duck would take a while, he told them, so would they like something else in the meantime, Pickled Zbod, for example. Sure, why not. It turned out to be sort of like pineapple chunks with herbs and spices, in a bed of—what was it? It sort of looked like rice.

They asked Peter Lorre.

"That is rice," he said in his near

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monotone. "That is rice as Guz makes it. Do you like it."

Yes, they liked it. It had a nutty flavor, reminiscent of pecans, though Katby said it was pistachio.

Then two young men came in—cocky, about draft registration age. They rocked back and forth on their heels and stared at the wall menu, hands in pockets.

"Hey, Ranky," said one after a while. "What kind of place *is* this?"

Ranky was opening his mouth to say something when Peter Lorre approached.

"May I help you, Young Gentlemen."

The two stared at the waiter, rocking slightly.

Not exactly the word I'd have used, thought Timbo. *Young hooligans, maybe, or punks—and not as in art.*

"We're not—" began the other. But Ranky must have felt that the waiter was maybe some kind of menace.

"Shut up, Piggo," he told him.

"May I help you, Young Gentlemen."

And I'm not sure I'd want to correct him, either, Timbo thought. *Who knows? He might take it as criticizing his English—*

Ranky must have felt the same way, even if a bit more dimly, because suddenly he grinned at the waiter.

"Hey, no problem. We just want a couple orders of spareribs."

"Of course," the waiter replied. "For here or to go."

"To go," Piggo said hastily.

In a few moments, the waiter returned with two orders of spareribs, in silver colored packages to retain the heat. The label read, "Thank You. Come Again."

Piggo opened his package, while Ranky fished 2 × $1.95 out of his pocket.

"Smells good," Piggo said, and grinned at the waiter, who simply nodded. "Tastes good, too," he added, offering Ranky a spareribs.

Ranky took a bite and quickly finished it.

"Hey, that was mine!" Piggo protested.

"Mine now." Cocky again, Ranky looked at the waiter. "What kind of place *is* this, anyway?"

"Guz's Place, Young Gentlemen." His voice was thin.

"Ah—yeah. Sure. Anything you like," Ranky said. Then he glanced at Piggo. "C'mon. Let's go."

"Right," Piggo said.

"Guz thanks you," the waiter said to their backs as they left.

"Topmost!" Arky commented to him. "You handled those kids real well. You know, I don't want to meet *anyone* named Ranky *or* Piggo!"

The waiter inclined his head slightly, smiled, and shrugged.

"Say, are *you* Guz?" she continued.

"No. I am not Guz. Guz is the chef. He works in the kitchen. I work here."

"Oh," she said.

But Timbo, too, had become interested in this Guz person. "Where is Guz from?"

The waiter paused. "Far away. Now he is here." He paused again. "However, sir, are you enjoying your meal. Would you care for something else."

OK, thought Timbo, *closed-mouth sort. Probably here illegally.*

"Very much," he said. "Could we

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have some more Plesht Tidbits? They're really good."

"Guz is glad you like them, sir," said the waiter. "I will return with another platter of Plesht Tidbits in a moment."

For the five of them, the whole meal cost only $37.06, dirt cheap considering today's city food prices. They decided they'd come back, of course, especially since Patti hadn't been able to make it. Patti and her friends—a fairly colorful crew, all things considered. Theater types mostly, but Patti did what she called "solid light sculptures," a combination of lights, light-bulbs, fabric, and reflecting objects, like beads, bits of broken glass (the tempered kind, which breaks into hundreds of small sparkling pieces), and snips of this and that. It all moved in the light, and some of her solid light sculptures were really sensuous experiences. You could stand inside one of them. They brought her some leftovers, also in a silver colored package labeled "Thank You. Come Again."

"We certainly shall," Sue told Peter Lorre. "It's all delicious—and different, too."

"Guz thanks you," said the waiter. "Very different."

Guz's Place *was* different. As it became better and better known among the locals, Guz—or the waiter, no one knew who—put up some wooden shelves at the back counter and filled them with bottles and jars of sauces and condiments and spices. Oddly shaped bottles, some plump, some thin with bumps, others flat with little openings covered by metal plugs. No one could read the labels. They were printed in a lovely flowing cursive script, originally written with a wood stick tapered at the end and dipped into ink—or so Jeff and Sue decided, and no one could disagree. But no one cared too much, either, because the odors from the bottles were wonderful. Gingery, some like cinnamon, others peppery, and still others like nothing anyone could recognize.

Katby finally decided to ask.

"What's in that tall bottle?" she asked Peter Lorre. "The one with the two spouts."

"That is margil," the waiter replied.

"Can I smell it?"

The waiter brought the bottle over and carefully uncapped one spout. A faint sweet odor arose, rather like warm molasses but sharper. Then he opened the other spout, also very carefully. For a moment, the odor was aromatic, almost creosote-like, but immediately it blended with the sweetness from the first spout and became warm, friendly somehow, like an old herb and spice cabinet suddenly opened.

"That's marvelous," said Katby.

"It goes very well in certain drinks," the waiter commented.

"Oh, like what?" asked Timbo. He liked good liquor.

"In particular, sir, it is a component of a Three Planets."

"What's that?" asked Timbo. "Can I have one?"

"We do not have a liquor license, sir," replied the waiter. "But perhaps Guz will prepare one as a gift to you and your friends. It is a specialty of his."

"That would be lovely—and thank you," Sue said.

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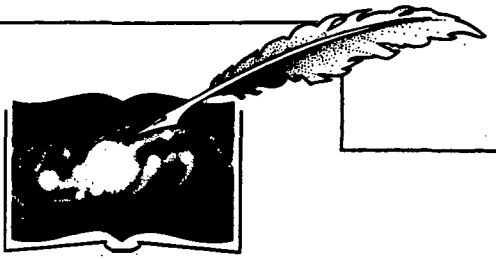

Algis Budrys on
L. RON HUBBARD's
WRITERS OF THE FUTURE

The Writers of The Future Contest has been extended to September 30, 1988. It's still growing.

WOTF has become a landmark feature of the SF (Speculative Fiction) scene. As founded and planned by L. Ron Hubbard, entry in the Contest is free. It's limited to new authors of science fiction or fantasy who have professionally published no more than three short stories or one novelette. Every three months, a panel of distinguished SF writers names the top three finishers for outright cash grants of $1000, $750 and $500, respectively.

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As you could see by reading a copy of "L. Ron Hubbard Presents WRITERS OF THE FUTURE," Volumes I, II or III, the Contest favors no particular type of SF over any other. The books also include how-to-write essays by the Contest judges, as well as an article by L. Ron Hubbard on the practicalities of artistic expression. Each book contains a complete set of Contest rules. It's a useful volume.

Every story in the Contest has an equal chance. Manuscripts are circulated to the judges with the authors' names removed. As Co-ordinating Judge, I evaluate every manuscript, and pass the finalists on to the ultimate judges who determine the winners. The only way to win the money, the trophies, and all the subsequent benefits, is to write a good story, and then enter it. If you think you'd like to do that, or if you'd like a detailed rules sheet, or have any questions whatever, write to:

L. Ron Hubbard's WRITERS OF THE FUTURE
P.O. Box 1630
Los Angeles, CA 90078

Please send a stamped self-addressed return envelope of the appropriate size with your manuscript or rules-request.

— Algis Budrys

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"I shall see." The waiter went off with the margil towards the kitchen door.

"That's a new picture," Jeff remarked. A painting of a low flat landscape, the sky faintly carmine, the sun dim. "Exotic," he continued. Basically, Jeff was a realist painter and didn't have too much empathy for this exotic stuff.

The waiter returned with the drink, in a low, round glass, almost platter-like, but deeper. The curves of the stem resembled the cursive writing on the labels. "With the compliments of Guz's Place," he said, ceremoniously giving the glass to Timbo, who sniffed, then smiled appreciatively.

"Rich." He passed the glass to Arky.

She sniffed too, and the glass went round the table. Everyone commented on the richness, the warmth.

"The stem is beautiful," Patti said. "The light winds around in it."

"It is great art, making such glasses," the waiter observed.

Timbo took the glass back from Patti and sipped.

"Hey—that's *good!*" he said. "What's *in* this?"

"Margil, vuzd, and rum," the waiter replied.

"Unbelievable," Timbo continued. His head was spinning slightly. "It's strong," he added, giving the glass to Arky. She barely tasted it—she didn't like hard liquor, as everyone knew—and agreed. Again, the glass went around the table. Finally, Patti sipped it, looking into the nearly empty glass.

"There's light inside," she said very quietly. "The light's *inside* the glass."

And it was—or so it seemed, but it was hard to tell, given how potent the drink was. But who cared? Indeed, it looked as if the light spun and danced and wove itself around the curls and curves of the stem, entering the liquid, to diffract and re-color itself, only to wind back into another curve of the stem. Patti stared and stared into the glass.

"It's big in there," she said. "The light goes on for miles. It *moves*."

"You see well," the waiter said, and no one thought his comment was strange. "Making such glasses is a great art."

Very delicately, Patti handed the empty glass back to the waiter. "I would like to learn such an art," she said.

"Perhaps you shall," the waiter replied. For Patti—and Timbo too—his outline was wavery. The drink was very strong and the glass so beautiful.

"Thank you very much," said Patti, almost in a whisper.

"Guz thanks *you*," the waiter said.

Jeff broke the mood. Sometimes he had no patience for Patti's almost mystical affiliation for light.

"Are those the bargain coupons?" He pointed to a small pile of cards on the back counter.

"Indeed they are, sir. You may have some, if you like."

"Sure," said Jeff, and took four or five when the waiter offered them. "It's a nice script. Very nice calligraphy." He stared at them for a moment. "What do they say?"

"It entitles the bearer to Varjinian Duck at half-price," the waiter explained.

"All right!" said Arky. "We'll take it. Varjinian Duck is topmost food."

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They all took the cards and, still feeling the Three Planets, admired the cursive writing most enthusiastically. *I think I'll ask Professor Damura about this*, Jeff thought. He pocketed the cards and joined the others on their way out. *Exotic*, he thought, *like the painting*.

Of the entire crew, Arky and Timbo ate there most often, but so did Patti, now that she knew about the place.

"Next time," she said, "let's bring wine. It'd go with the Plesht Bits."

"There is no corkage charge," said the waiter.

"All right!" said Arky.

They decided to have a party to celebrate Patti's opening. Well, maybe *opening* wasn't the right word—the show wasn't in a gallery or anything, but she and her friends had put up a whole collection of solid light pieces at somebody's apartment, so it was *sort* of like an opening.

"Hey, let's get Guz to cater," they said.

But there was a slight problem with money. A lot of people at an opening, even one in somebody's apartment. Katby suggested a trade: offer a solid light piece for the food.

Timbo and Arky went to Guz's Place with the suggestion.

"In principle," the waiter began, "I do not see any problem with such a trade. However, I must see, of course. I will check with Guz." And he disappeared behind a counter filled with blue bottles.

They had noticed that his accent was slowly sounding more and more American. His inflections were in the right places now, making them sure that he, like Guz, was some kind of foreigner. They no longer called him Peter Lorre.

In a moment, he returned.

"Guz says that, in principle, a trade is agreeable but wishes to know what kind of art is offered."

"Fair enough," Timbo said. "Nothing valuable—I mean pricey—but Patti wants to give Guz one of her light pieces. It's pretty. Maybe Guz'll like it."

They opened the box with Patti's piece in it. It stood about a foot tall, with metal threads woven together with small pieces of colored glass that caught the light carried along rods from the base. As the glass pieces shifted, they caught the light differently. It sparkled and danced.

The waiter stared for a moment, then seemed to catch himself.

"Indeed." He paused again, looking at the moving light. "I will bring it to Guz, if I may?"

"Can't he come out here?" Arky wanted to know. "The piece is sort of delicate."

"Guz cannot travel easily." The waiter still seemed distracted by the light sculpture. "I assure you that I will treat it with great care."

"Oh, it's all right," Timbo said.

"Thank you," the waiter replied, and took the sculpture into the back.

A while passed. Finally the waiter reappeared.

"Guz thanks Patti," he said. "He would be most honored to prepare the food for her opening. He sends profound regrets that he cannot attend. And, now, let us consider the details of the arrangements—"

The opening was an immense success. But all Patti could say was that the

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food and the light *went* together, even though she couldn't explain why.

Soon the neighbors accepted Guz's Place. The little kids began to come in around the evening to pick up family dinners of Varjinian Duck, or spareribs, or whatever. Then some workmen from a construction job down the street came in for lunch. Several of them decided that this dim sum, or whatever it was, wasn't real food, but the others disagreed. "You're crazy," they explained. "This ain't dim sum, this stuff is *good*." So they took to eating there regularly, especially the duck, which you could get for half price if you had one of those little cards.

One day the Reverend Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Bolton visited the restaurant. Would Guz, they asked politely, be willing to donate a dish for the Church of Our Lord in Christ Sunday social. It was a neighborhood, mostly black church, and Guz's Place was a neighborhood restaurant in an interracial, but not very well integrated area, and as a gesture—

Indeed so, the waiter indicated. It was an honor to be asked.

"Perhaps Mr. Guz would join us. Good pies and home food," Mrs. Bolton said.

"It is just Guz, Mrs. Bolton."

"I know what you mean," she said, smiling, and continued. "Guz is a fine cook, I've heard."

The Reverend Dr. Bolton was eyeing the wall menu.

"Guz thanks you deeply," the waiter replied, "but unfortunately he cannot travel easily. Instead, I would be most pleased if I could present the platters myself at your church."

"That would be lovely," Mrs. Bolton said. "It's unfortunate that Guz's health is poor. Some of the ladies are very good cooks themselves. They would enjoy his company."

"He would enjoy theirs, I am sure —and their pies. I extend his apologies, if I may, and hope that I can suitably represent him."

And with many assurances of mutual respect—after all, good chefs are hard to find, and, well, somebody who *really* appreciates good pies, now, that's a person to respect—they all agreed that the waiter would represent Guz at the social (and maybe bring him back a slice of Mrs. Bolton's apple-rhubarb pie). Smiling, the waiter said that Guz would be looking forward to preparing the dishes—and to the pie.

"It's first rate," the Reverend Dr. Bolton observed. "Now, I think I'll try some of those ribs myself."

"Of course, Dr. Bolton." The waiter left for the kitchen.

"I'm sure they're not as good as *yours*, though," Dr. Bolton said to Mrs. Bolton.

She smiled.

The next day Jeff was near school, and he remembered the cards. They were still stuffed into his jacket, so he went to see Professor Damura.

"This is very interesting, very interesting," said Professor Damura, examining them carefully. "Yes, I think you are right. The original calligraphy was done with a wood dipped in ink, in the Japanese style. But the script itself is not Oriental—" He corrected him-

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self, smiling. "At least it is not an Oriental script that I know."

Jeff felt a bit disappointed, since he had wanted to show off the next time they went to Guz's.

"There is an oddity here," continued Professor Damura. "If you look carefully, Jeff, you will see that the script has been done twice. Once to make the shapes themselves, and once to add the curls and additional marks. Lovely work, lovely indeed. The additional lines are extremely delicate, almost tracery. May I keep this?"

"Sure. It even entitles to bearer to half-price Varjinian Duck."

"Then let me have two. I have a friend who admires both delicate calligraphy and fine food. He and I shall visit Guz's Place."

"Oh, great. We go there all the time. Try the Plesht Tidbits. They're good too. And maybe *you* can meet Guz—no one else has. We don't even know what he looks like."

Professor Damura agreed that they would try the Plesht Tidbits and perhaps even meet Guz.

The church social went wonderfully. A great—if ladylike—fuss was made over the platters Guz had sent. The Plesht Tidbits were an especial hit, and so were the spareribs, which carried Dr. Bolton's personal testimony.

A tall, black young man got a plate of ribs and potato salad and rejoined his friend at a picnic table. It was covered with a white tablecloth. Judiciously, he ate a spareribs—and then two more.

"You know, William," he declared, "these remind me of the ribs my Grandma used to make. *Nobody* could make ribs like her."

William cocked an eye. "Up here, Otto?" he said doubtfully. He tried a spareribs. "Up here," he agreed, taking another. Then he looked at his friend with a mischievous twinkle and next at the waiter.

"Say," he began, "have you guys got his Old Grandma hiding back there in the kitchen?"

"Grandma?" the waiter said. "No, sir, I am afraid that we do not have Grandma—"

"Well, Otto here said that your ribs are as good as hers. So it stands to reason she's making them, right?"

"Ah, no, sirs—I don't believe—"

Otto laughed. "That settles it. Yep. That's where she's got to after all these years. Yep. Old Grandma Ida."

"Ida? But sirs—"

"Look, it's fine," William broke in. "Just keep her there, so she can keep on cooking like this!"

Then, understanding, the waiter laughed quietly. "Guz deeply appreciates the compliment. May we name them Old Grandma's Ribs in her honor?"

"I love it!" exclaimed Otto. "She never had anything *else* named for her. Now, fancy that!" He laughed and turned to Dr. Bolton. "Say, Reverend—come here and have some more of Old Grandma's Ribs. They got the recipe from her."

"You are too kind—" murmured the waiter.

"Not a bad name," Dr. Bolton said gravely, but his eyes also twinkled as he finished one of Old Grandma's Ribs. "Not a bad name at all."

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Finally, Mrs. Bolton extended the thanks of the church to Guz.

"Guz thanks *you* deeply for the honor. I shall convey your courtesies to him, Mrs. Bolton, and yours as well, gentlemen—"

"Just tell him not to let Old Grandma get away," William interrupted.

"And don't go raising the price on us just because they've got a name," Otto added.

"Of *course* not," the waiter began, but then he smiled. They were teasing him again. "Of *course* not. And we shall try to continue cooking as well as we can. However, if I may be excused, I must return to work. Please keep the platters for the church, as a gift from Guz's Place."

And, amid more thanks to Guz—or Old Grandma, as the case may have been—the waiter returned to open the restaurant for dinner.

Soon, Patti came in. She had been coming more and more often, if not to eat, then to look at the bottles and the glasses, now in their own carved wooden cabinet near the back counter. Occasionally, she would ask the waiter about them—where they came from, how they were made, how the light played inside—but he politely avoided answering. She really didn't care too much, since, for now, the glass and the light existed: and that was enough. They had put in some plants too, and the glass caught their green. Then the lights danced even more in the stems.

She was there when Professor Damura and his friend walked in.

Professor Damura greeted her warmly —she had taken his course in calligraphy. He turned to his friend, who was gazing with growing interest at the glasses in the cabinet.

"What do you think?" Damura finally asked.

"I don't know," his friend responded slowly. "I do not recognize the style of any of those glass pieces. Not at all—and I consider myself an expert."

The waiter came over.

'Would either of you gentlemen care for a cocktail?"

Patti hadn't known they had a liquor license.

"Order a Three Planets in a special glass," she suggested.

"May I get you one as well, Patti? We have a liquor license now." The waiter pointed to it. Its official look jarred with the webs of light caught in the glasses and with the traceried script on the bottles.

"Yes, let us try a Three Planets," said Professor Damura's friend. "Why don't you join us?" he asked Patti. She nodded, smiling.

"None for me," Professor Damura said. "Some tea, if you would."

"Indeed so, sir." The waiter went to the back.

"This is Irv Weller, from the museum," Professor Damura said to Patti. "Jeff showed me the calligraphy on the card, and Irv and I are now both quite interested. Ah—I see more of the same script on the bottles. No, one moment—"

He got up to look at the bottles, Weller joining him.

"There are two styles here," Damura said. "Both tracery, but somewhat different."

"Yes, that's so," Weller added. "One is based on a block of space which

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is filled in, and the other is continuous. Look."

Neither man touched the bottles, simply peered at them. The waiter came back with two Three Planets.

"Professor Damura teaches calligraphy," Patti said to him, taking her glass slowly, and looking at it, deep within it.

"He will find much to interest him, then," the waiter commented, "Sirs, your tea and your cocktail."

Weller took his glass and, like Patti, just looked at it.

"I know of no way to make such glass," he said finally. "I assume that you're an artist too, Patti?"

"Yes, and I'd love to know how to do these. I did the light sculpture in the corner." It sparkled gaily in the late afternoon sunlight.

"I noticed it," Weller said. "I can see why these glasses fascinate you."

"But I can't do anything like *this*." She looked at the waving curves of the stem of the Three Planets glass. "When you drink it, you can see the light inside. The glass, I mean, not the drink."

Weller nodded. Then Professor Damura rejoined them and toasted them with his tea.

"To all great artists, even if they are unknown."

They drank slowly, talking about art, about Patti's work, about artists . . . but, all throughout dinner, none of them could get the waiter to explain where either the food *or* the glasses came from.

The next day, mid-afternoon, a man came in.

"May I help you, sir?" the waiter said.

"No," said the man, showing him some credentials. An inspector from the city. He looked around. "Let's see your operating license."

"It is there, sir."

The inspector checked it. "OK, liquor license."

Again, the waiter showed it to him, and the inspector nodded.

He looked at the bottles on the shelves. "Those imported?"

"Yes, sir."

"Got your import papers for them? Let's see 'em."

"Import papers, sir? I do not believe I understand."

"Imported food got to have import papers. You got 'em or you ain't."

The waiter paused for a moment. "I will check with the chef."

"Take your time," the inspector said dryly.

The waiter returned shortly. "We do not have import papers for these," he began, "but we are unaware of this regulation—"

"You're aware of it now, pal." He stared at the waiter for a moment. "Section 508 of the U.S. Customs Regs. And around here—" he gestured towards the street and the city outside "—around here, it's section 117. You make and you keep records of anything you import. And don't tell me them bottles came from the local store. They didn't." He cocked his head, eyeing the waiter. "You foreigners," he said finally. "You come around here and you don't know the law. Oh well. Tell you what. You got some *other* kind of paper instead?"

"No, sir," the waiter said slowly. "I do not believe we have any papers concerning these spices—"

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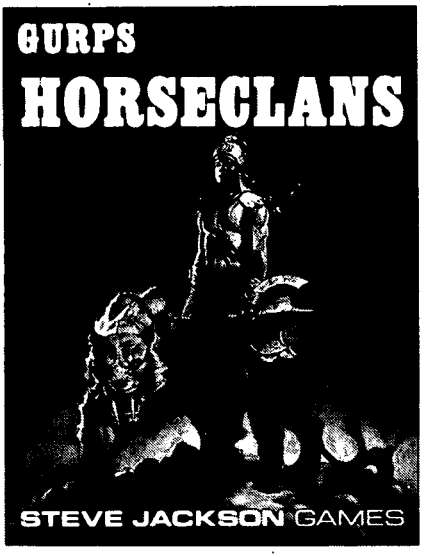

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"Nothing else at all?"

"Sir?"

"Without *some* kind of paper, I gotta write you up. Nothing gets you written up."

"I fear not, sir."

The inspector just looked at him and took out a citation pad. He went over to the operating license and copied down some information. Then he returned and gave the waiter the citation.

"Like I said, pal, no paper gets you one of these. Next time better have some *paper* for me to look at. Know what I mean?"

And he walked out.

The next day there arrived in the mail an official summons. It spoke ponderously of failure to keep, maintain, render, or present proper import documentation for otherwise illegally imported spices, condiments, herbs, flavorings, and flavoring substitutes, namely, in brief, and to wit, such substances as defined in the ordinance hereinunder described as edible, and as were or could be used in the preparation of food for public consumption in a public restaurant, tavern, bar, or other food shop, and were or could be sold or provided to such establishments for such purposes, so that unless it could be shown at an open court hearing that the importation of such aforesaid edible substances was not contrary to the interests of the United States of America, whereinsuch it was hereby ordered that fines specified under Section 117 of the laws of . . . etc., etc., etc. It was signed with an illegible name at the bottom and had three red stamps on it, all of which boiled down to one thing: Guz's Place had better cough up some import documents or face a fine of $10 per day per carton, crate, carboy, bottle, or container of aforeheresaid imported spices, condiments, herbs, etc., etc., etc.

Shortly after, Arky and Timbo came in, and the waiter showed them the summons. They read it, spices, herbs, carboys, et ceteras, and all.

"What is this garbage?" Timbo finally burst out.

"Import papers," the waiter murmured. "But there is a treaty—"

"Yeah, sure, but this is absolute *crap!*" Timbo waved the summons at the waiter, then threw it on a table. "No kidding, they're really jerking you around. You got a lawyer who understands this gobbledegook?"

"This what?" the waiter said.

"Look, the owner, proprietor, major share-holder, or whatever has to go to court. It says that here." Timbo stabbed his finger at the clause.

"Yeah," Arky added. "This clause here holds you in contempt of court if Guz doesn't show up at the hearing."

"Guz cannot travel," the waiter said uneasily.

Timbo looked at Arky, then they grinned at each other.

"No problem," Arky said. "Just get a doctor to say that he's too sick to travel and can't go to court. Then the lawyer can represent him."

"Yeah, the old doctor's note trick," said Timbo. "I like it. And we'll all testify how Guz never comes out of the kitchen because he's crippled or something—"

"—and, sure, you can get Reverend Bolton to testify that Guz couldn't even travel to the Christ Church social, and *that's* just around the corner."

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"Right," finished Timbo. "And how old Guz was so sad that he couldn't get there or to Patti's opening—yeah, sure, that'd work."

The waiter smiled. "Indeed, he was. But this—I do not understand. And I fear that I am boring you with our problems."

Timbo shook his head, and Arky smiled. "No sweat," he began, and then his tone changed. "Hey, look, we all *like* Guz's Place. We don't want to see you guys in trouble with this kind of hoked up stuff. There probably really isn't any such regulation, or it doesn't apply, or something. Yeah, we want to help out."

"Guz thanks you," the waiter replied. "However, I fear that the problem may be difficult. Even so, I deeply thank you."

"If it goes to court—" Timbo began, but Arky interrupted.

"It'd be fun to testify," she said mischievously. "I'll get all dressed up in something topmost, like a spangled jumpsuit with Patti's lights on it. No, I won't do that, I promise. But we want to help."

"Yes," the waiter said quietly. "Yes. As you say: if it goes to court. A court of law. Perhaps we *do* know the law—" He smiled to himself, and Arky remembered his staring at the two young men who had come in—the ones with the strange names—

"Remember," Arky assured him, "we want to help. We really do."

The waiter bowed his head. "Thank you."

Of course, it turned out that *everyone* wanted to help. Pretty soon the neighborhood, and all the regulars, knew that Guz had been written up for something—the details of the story differing considerably, with some insisting that the citation was for not having a proper restaurant building license (whatever that was), others insisting that it was for not having clean washrooms (a lie—they were spotless), still others insisting that it was for not paying off somebody (which sounded likely), but, still, everyone felt that Guz shouldn't have to pay, even if he was guilty because, what the hell, they gave food to the church and sent the little kids home with their takeout orders of Varjinian Duck and Zbod, and, hey, man, *look*, Guz *is* Old Grandma and the Man is after him, and no way they're going to do *that* to us, no way *at all*.

Nor did Professor Damura and Irv Weller like it when they found out that Guz's Place was being charged with some sort of customs infraction for having bottles of spices and herbs.

Weller puffed on his pipe. "They have to prove, I think, that Guz actually *uses* the contents of those bottles as spices and herbs. But who is to say that he does? We ourselves know that the bottles are kept outside, where we can all see them, whereas Guz works in the kitchen itself. It seems to follow, does it not, that these bottles are not functionally condiment containers in the least, but are artifacts of Guz's own people, placed on display for everyone's enjoyment while they eat?"

"Yes, that is true," replied Professor Damura, "but we should recall that there are, perhaps, customs regulations prohibiting the import of works of art from Guz's home into the United States."

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"Not relevant," Weller commented. "The charge is not for importing works of art, but for importing condiments. And I suggest that these bottles are no such thing."

"I agree thoroughly that they are works of art," rejoined Professor Damura. "Indeed, we shall both happily testify to their unusual nature and value. But might not the very fact of our testimony that they are art, not foodstuffs, awaken a second branch of customs to another possible infraction?"

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it," Weller replied, somewhat sententiously. "Right now, we have a chance to strike a blow for freedom of art itself—the right of a person, like Guz, to possess and display the traditional works of art of his people in a manner that he, and he alone, can deem suitable."

"Yes, that seems right," Professor Damura said. "If, for example, there were some religious or ceremonial function associated with the bottles and glasses, why, then, Guz has the right to bring the objects associated with his faith to the United States."

"Precisely," said Weller, puffing on his pipe. "I believe we agree. We shall offer, shall we not, our services as experts in calligraphy and in glass (for that is what we are) to prevent what is clearly a miscarriage of justice, not to speak of a perversion against freedom of religion and artistic expression—"

"We might also prevent them from closing down a very good restaurant," Damura added dryly. "Speaking of which, are you hungry?"

"Yes," said Weller. "Let's have dinner at Guz's—and offer him our expert services."

"Excellent. And *you* can have a Three Planets."

"That I will," said Weller, and they left his office in the museum to travel down to the restaurant together.

And pretty soon, even the uptown people—the fancy ones, cognoscenti, and illuminati, and whatnot—found out that their favorite secret restaurant was maybe in legal trouble. These, of course, were the folk who seek out little restaurants in strange, slummy places and eat there until the word gets out and *everyone* starts to eat there, so that the menu whereupon changes from real homemade food to canned ravioli sauce or whatever the ethnic equivalent might be for Guz's Place (which none of the cognoscenti nor illuminati nor whatnot had figured out, though they asked often enough). But they came there, sometimes even driving in the wrong direction for a while to throw off pursuing competitors in the "Find-the-Best-Unknown-Restaurant-Before-Anyone-Else-Does" sweepstakes, because the food was simply uttermost good (or whatever the superlative of the week might be). Why, the place hadn't even been found by Clam Connolby, the hottest food critic in the *whole city*.

Not that the cognoscenti, illuminati, or whatnot were too helpful. They did offer the services of various lawyers, experts in everything from international corporate law to damage cases involving rabid dogs, but of course all the lawyers they knew just happened to be in Europe this week, or in the Midwest consulting on a *really* fascinating rabid dog

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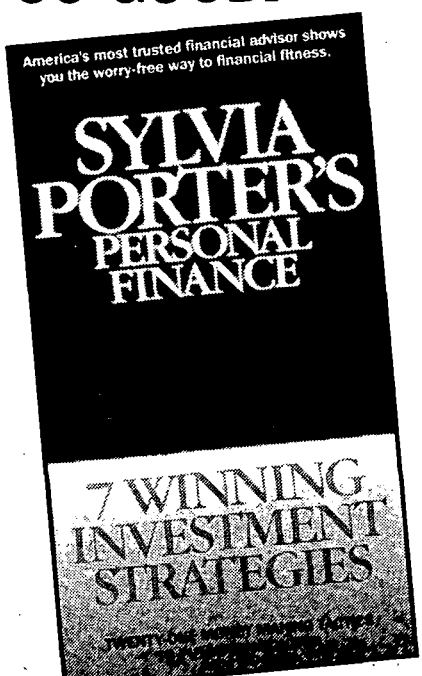

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case—but the spirit was there, or the intention was good, or at least it would be until Clam Cannolby happened to find the place, whereupon the riffraff would descend on it, and the restaurant would start to serve canned ravioli sauce, or whatever the ethnic equivalent might be for Guz. Then the hunt would be on again, for a still newer unknown restaurant. . . . But they did sympathize with Guz, even if only for selfish reasons. Like the neighbors, they didn't care if Guz was guilty—they didn't want the place to be closed down before the riffraff found it, so they could whereupon say that they ate there before the riffraff, or even before Clam Cannolby.

But, unbeknownst to Guz, the waiter, Patti and the art students, Dr. and Mrs. Thomas Bolton and the neighbors, and—perhaps especially—the cognoscenti, illuminati, and whatnot, the news was also creeping out along another tendril of information flow. The original citation—now somewhat over a week old, with two more days to the hearing—had been duly entered in a computer somewhere in that mass of buildings collectively known as "City Hall." And—a fact known to *very* few people indeed—the tapes had been duly transmitted to another computer, this one much bigger and much, much faster, located in a totally anonymous building in Washington, where operated the offices of the even more anonymous entity, referred to as the Acme Development Company.

And that very large and very, very fast computer finally encountered a summons for violation of the customs rule prohibiting the undocumented import of spices, condiments, herbs, etc., etc., etc., issued to something called "Guz's Place." The very large and very, very fast computer now burped momentarily and sent some electronic signals to a printer, which, compared to the very large and very, very fast computer, worked as slowly as an ox-cart. But, still, it duly printed out "PRIORITY ATTENTION— PRIORITY ATTENTION: GUZ'S PLACE —SUMMONS ISSUED TO, FOR CUSTOMS VIOLATIONS."

Whereupon the printout landed quite quickly on someone's desk who looked at it and said, "Oh, good grief, *no*."

Then she added to herself, "Those damn fools."

She brought the printout into another office.

"Here you are, Johnnie," she said.

"Thanks, Krylla," he said automatically and then looked at the printout. "Oops."

"Two days to the hearing," Krylla replied. "You read it and I'll try to dig up some leverage for us."

She went back to her office to try to find out which judge would hear the case, and where and when. And also to make some hotel reservations. The signs were clear—this one would need the personal touch. She picked up the telephone.

Well, some good luck and some bad. The good luck was that even if it was an import infraction, the citation had been issued by a *city* inspector, and that meant the case would be heard by a municipal judge. Everyone knew that municipal judges were easier to sway with various extra-legal considerations then federal bureaucrats, and a phone call to the state party chairman, chief

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honcho Sam Klepko, might get the judge to throw the case out. A call to the Chief of Customs wouldn't hurt either.

The bad luck—the case would be heard by Judge William Victor Barsamella, an old-time reform judge, very knowledgeable in the law, who still worked in the smaller courts because he felt that was where real legal knowledge was most needed, a rare man of genuine honor. *He'd* be a tough one, even for Klepko. A call to the governor, requesting a post facto pardon, if needed. But, still, they'd have to go personally to see the judge.

John Smith came into her office. "I've gotten clearance from on high to use all the paperwork we've got."

"*All* of it?"

"That's what I was told—and when You-Know-Who says use everything, he means *everything*."

"Well, he signed the original treaty, so I guess he knows. Let's go—I'll give you details on the way."

But none of the people sitting around at Guz's Place knew anything about You-Know-Who, or Krylla, or John Smith, or the Acme Development Company. If they had, they might have been very interested, but, as it was, they didn't and they weren't. So they all sat around passing the time, glumly speculating about what would happen next. Slowly, more and more people came in to commiserate with each other and eat Old Grandma's Spareribs or Varjinian Duck for maybe the last time. And certainly to drink a few Three Planets from the tiny little bar before the Man showed up and boarded up the place for not paying $10.00 per day per bottle or container of vuzd or margil or whatever it was.

Patti claimed that the lights in the glasses had turned darker and sadder.

That interested Professor Damura. "The lights, Patti. You call them alive. What are they, do you think?"

"They're very spiritual—" she started, then corrected herself. "No, not spiritual in the way we understand it. You remember, Professor, you used to say that when certain characters were drawn, how the spirit of the artist entered the strokes and lines? It's like that, but it's more. The spirit of the light—" you could almost hear her put capital letters on the words "—lives inside the glass. It feels things, like right now it's sad because of all this trouble. Here, look."

She gave the Three Planets glass to him. He examined it gravely, but could not see what she meant.

Nonetheless, he recognized *her* connections to the spirit of the light (and he too nearly put capital letters on the words). So he continued.

"Yes?" he said.

Patti smiled. "It can be hard to see—like the first time you do Japanese characters."

He recognized the point and smiled back.

"You sense things that are not for everyone to sense," he replied. Here was reason indeed to feel that the woven glass stems and the light they refracted and diffracted had meaning deeper than their appearance suggested to *him*.

"And Guz," he pressed her, "do you feel that for Guz the light is a spirit?"

"I don't know, but I know that he loves the light too," she said slowly.

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"I don't know about Guz. He liked my piece. But I meant the artists who made these. They didn't *capture* the light, they invited it to live in the glass. And it does. . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Damura smiled, for he recognized how a young artist—but one with great promise, he told himself—might feel sad *and* elated at seeing how another artist had mastered an expressive, spiritual craft. No, he corrected himself silently, not *mastered*. Patti was right—like the great craftsmen who made the old scrolls or the temple bells, the meaning and sound had been *invited* to live in the material form given to it by the artist. And *that*, Professor Damura knew, was seen only by two kinds of people—those, like himself, who had learned the meanings and the skills through long study, and by people like Patti, who, experiencing the meanings immediately and directly, needed only to learn the craft of giving those meanings their own form.

He smiled, sadly, perhaps. "If this all works out, Patti, you must study and learn that craft."

"I will," she whispered.

"Perhaps Weller can invite some of the craftspeople to the Museum. Their work surely must become better known—and then there will be students who will learn." *Some like myself*, he thought, *who will never have what this young woman has*. But he smiled at her—without her and without these great craft workers of Guz's people *and* other places, people like he and Weller would have no role either.

"We study, and you will create," he said to her.

But her answer was interrupted by the arrival of Arky and Timbo.

"Hi," Timbo said. "Jeff and Sue are coming—they're parking. Let's order something to honor old Guz—"

"I know what you want," Arky said. "*You* want a Three Planets."

"You bet," said Timbo, and tried to get the waiter's attention.

But, unlike other times, he was very busy, right now talking with Reverend and Mrs. Bolton. They reaffirmed their support for Guz—after all, it was just a typical petty shakedown, nothing more, and again they promised to testify how important Guz's Place had become for the neighborhood.

And, for many of the neighbors, it was now an absolute fact that if Guz himself wasn't Old Grandma, why then Old Grandma certainly worked in that kitchen. And why not? No one had ever seen anyone go into the kitchen (except the waiter), but obviously there was another door, and nobody, I mean *nobody*, could possibly make spareribs or duck that way except if they *were* Old Grandma.

And even if it turned out that Old Grandma wasn't in the kitchen, no problem with that either. She wasn't in there *anymore*, is all—but she *had* been, to teach Guz how to cook. And if she had come back to life—why just look at those plates the Church had been given. There was happiness in them and godliness, too. Guz belonged here, and no sleaze shakedown artist with city credentials could change *that*. No way.

Finally the waiter excused himself, so Timbo and Jeff got their Three Planets and Plesht Tidbits, and William and Otto got two more beers to accom-

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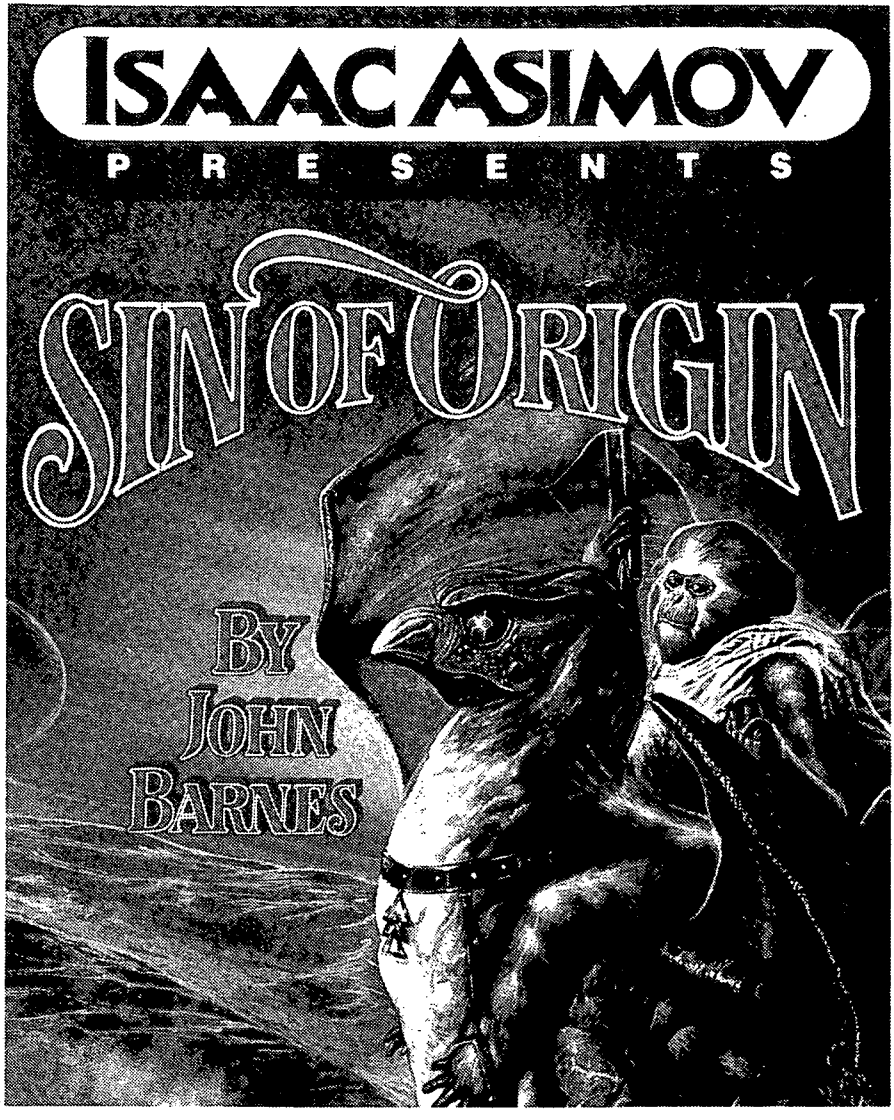

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pany their symbolic last order of spareribs.

"You know," asserted William, eating a spareribs, "your Old Grandma will *not* like it if we let her get thrown out."

"Yeah," Otto agreed. "She would *not*."

"We shall go to court and *tell* them." William sipped his beer somberly.

Somewhat later, a man and woman walked in, each carrying an attaché case. He was middle height, greying hair with gray eyes, and she was—well, Jeff's word was "exotic," like the painting. Also somber, Timbo watched them as he sipped his Three Planets. His eyes followed them as they talked to the waiter and then went into the kitchen with him.

He sat bolt upright. Into the *kitchen? No one* ever went into that kitchen except the waiter. He leaned forward to look at the closed kitchen door.

"Hey, Arky—did you see that? Those two people just went in the *back*."

"Friends, I guess," said Jeff, who also had been watching the two, but more particularly the woman. "I wonder who *she* is."

Sue looked at him sharply. "Give me some more Plesht pieces, dear," she said.

But they didn't come out, and finally everyone had to leave. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, what with the hearing scheduled at 9:30 in Judge Barsamella's court, Room 114, Building 2, City Hall. They had to get up early, get dressed—and Arky promised not to wear a jumpsuit with spangles, just in case the judge wanted to hear her testimony. The others agreed it was time to go—they had their names on the testimony list too. It seemed that a lot of people wanted to testify.

Arky and Timbo arrived at court early. They greeted the Boltons, who had a black councilman with them, and then stood looking at the badly painted, yellowing walls of the hall, not knowing what to say or do. Arky had been cheerful before and had decided to wear a dress, while Timbo had put on his only suit. And a tie, which was too tight, of course. Now they both felt faintly depressed.

Patti arrived, and they greeted her quietly. She was wearing dark red, a dress that neither Arky nor Timbo had seen before—a far cry from her blue jeans.

"It's the color of the glass last night at the end," she said, and they nodded.

Soon the hall crowded up—the Boltons met members of the congregation, some of Patti's friends showed up, then Jeff, Sue, and Katby, then Professor Damura and Irv Weller. But no one saw the waiter, nor Guz, nor the grey-eyed man or his beautiful companion.

"Where's the waiter?" whispered Arky, but then the doors opened. They all entered the courtroom. It too was badly painted, dim, unpleasant. Way up in the front were the waiter, the lawyers, the assistants, the stenotypist, but no one they could recognize as Guz, even though they saw the grey-eyed man and the exotic woman.

"All stand," the Court Crier announced, and they stood for the judge's entrance. Judge Barsamella was tall, grey-black hair, in the long black robes of his office. They were impressed.

The judge accepted medical evidence

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that Guz could not attend but would be represented by counsel.

"They took our advice," Arky whispered in Timbo's ear.

He nodded.

The charge was read, and it was ascertained that appropriate customs representatives were present (presumably to prove that it was against the interests of the United States of America for Guz to have his spices). The inspector testified that he had asked for, and had not received, the import papers for the spices. Appropriate sections of the law were cited to prove that he could ask for those papers as a city inspector, rather than as a customs official. The customs representatives concurred that due to quirks and oddities in the law, all also duly cited, he indeed could do so. Sections of case law and precedent were cited to prove that such papers were usually and normally required in relation to imported spices, condiments, herbs, flavorings, and similar substances. A customs representative, in the person of a Mr. Hoskins, testified that the rules were designed to prevent the inadvertent importation of disease organisms, plant viruses, wood rot molds and fungi, nematodes, weevils, beetles, parasites, pests, and vermin in general. It wore on oppressively.

Guz's lawyer asked only a few questions. Had the inspector actually seen the alleged spices used for flavoring food during its preparation. No, sir, he had not, not with his own eyes. Why, then, asked the lawyer, had he assumed that they were used for such purposes? He had asked and ascertained the correctness of his assumption from a restaurant employee. The name of that employee? He didn't know, except that was him sitting there. A brief conversation. Yes, that was the employee. A moment's recess was requested by Guz's lawyer. The judge granted it. Whispered words between the waiter and the lawyer. The lawyer shrugged slightly, and, dropping whatever point he had been driving at with the inspector, excused him from the stand.

But the lawyer did have some additional questions for Mr. Hoskins, the customs representative. Mr. Hoskins was, it could be assumed, an expert on regulations about importing food? Warily, Mr. Hoskins admitted that he possessed expert information but was not an expert *per se*— the judge disallowed the quibble by asking if Mr. Hoskins knew what he was talking about when it came to import regulations.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Hoskins. "I have expert information on the topic under inquiry."

"In which case," Guz's lawyer asked, "would you tell us if this regulation is aimed at *importers* of spices or at professional *users* of spices?"

The witness seemed puzzled. Judge Barsamella interrupted.

"Let's say my brother owns a restaurant," he said, "and he has a jar of imported oregano in his restaurant kitchen for making pasta sauce. According to your expert information, are you suggesting that he must have, possess, or display import papers for that jar of oregano?"

Mr. Hoskins asseverated that such papers were needed for such oregano to have been brought legally into the United States, although it need not be

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oregano, provided only that such papers existed—

"I'm asking about my brother, Jerry Barsamella, who owns a restaurant," the judge said. "Does *he*—Jerry Barsamella—have to have import papers for that jar of oregano?"

The witness explicated that his understanding of the matter was that import papers must exist, and that if they existed, then it followed that the spices of Mr. Jerry Baarsamella were not, nor had been, imported illegally.

"My brother, Mr. Hoskins, my brother," the judge insisted. "Does he have to have those papers?"

Mr. Hoskins preponderated that such was *de facto* the case.

"What is *de facto* the case?" the judge asked.

"It is *de facto* the case," Mr. Hoskins portentified, "that if any spice, condiment, or herb were legally imported into the United States, then, if such be the case, then such papers exist and, *in potentia*, are accessible to any restaurateur, tavernkeeper, or other supervisor of a public food establishment."

"Sounds like a *no*," the judge said, turning to the assistant city attorney. "Am I right?"

"That is the issue in the court today, Your Honor," the city attorney hedged.

Judge Barsamella looked silently at him for a moment. Then he turned to Guz's lawyer and asked him if he was ready to present his side of the case.

He was, and awaited the court's pleasure to proceed.

"Excellent," said Judge Barsamella. However, a question must be asked first of those in the courtroom—did they know why they could testify in this case? Murmurs from the courtroom arose and fell into silence.

The judge continued: "It is because the value of the law is not merely in its letter—" and something in the room, the judge's voice, the solemnity, made Timbo listen to the cliché as if he had never heard it before "—but also in how it is litigated. Records are sometimes lost, through no fault of the individual; the degree of offense against society varies depending on precedent from other cases; the statutory requirement to protect the interests of the United States requires that many voices be heard. All these matters make it imperative for me to learn from both sides the nature of the case. And, so, the law permits individuals to testify and thereby to enlighten the court, making its decisions equally compatible with the law and with justice—"

"He's neat," Arky whispered in Timbo's ear.

"Yeah," Timbo whispered back.

They expected the waiter to testify, but he did not. Instead, Guz's lawyer offered the court a written deposition from Guz, notarized and witnessed. The judge ruled that it could be accepted in lieu of personal testimony from either Guz or his employees. In brief, what did the deposition assert?

That the spices had been placed on display primarily as decorative objects of great cultural significance to enhance the attractiveness and ambience of the restaurant and, as such, their presence in Guz's Place was not contrary to the interests of the United States.

The judge was doubtful. If the law specified that import papers were needed for condiments, they were needed re-

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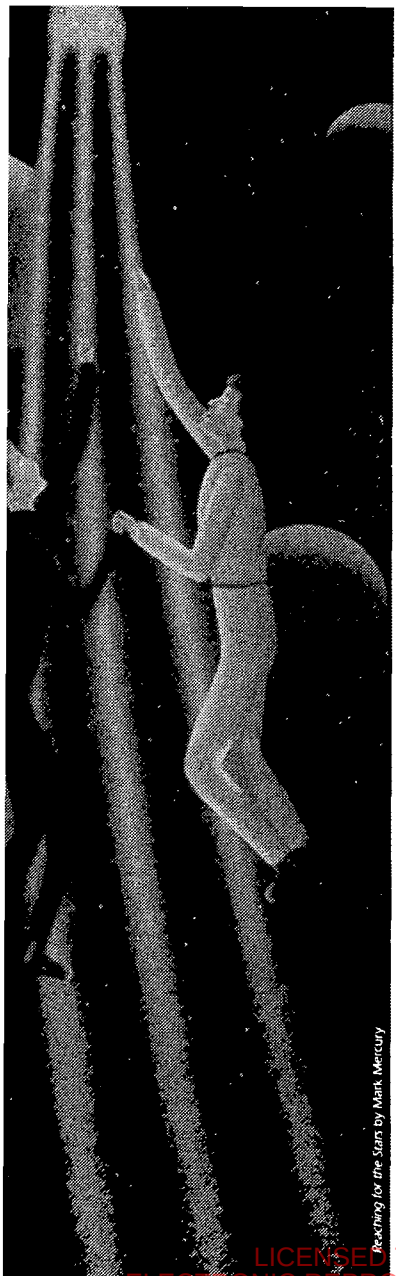
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gardless of other possible uses for them or their containers. Did the lawyer assert that if he, Judge Barsamella, placed that bottle of oregano in his chambers as decoration that it was therefore no longer a spice? (There were chuckles in the courtroom; the court crier silenced them.)

No, that was not the assertion, continued the lawyer, but he would produce testimony that the nature and quality of the containers themselves were sufficiently unusual, artistic even, that their primary purpose under the law was no longer as flavorings for food.

Judge Barsamella would hear the witnesses' testimony to that effect.

Professor Damura was the first witness. He spoke quietly and firmly of his conviction that the nature of the calligraphy—his expertise, the court granted that—made the containers of immense artistic and cultural meaning, and that it was clear that they had spiritual significance to their makers.

Judge Barsamella wanted to know more about such meanings. That bottle of oregano, he commented, might have "cultural" significance to an Italian; was it not also an herb to be used with food?

Professor Damura agreed, but suggested that in the case of these containers—some were duly produced and examined by the Court—the quality of the workmanship, first, implied that they were not simply bought in a local or foreign food market, but had artistic value themselves, as Dr. Weller of the museum would say—the judge allowed as how Dr. Weller could testify to that himself, and Professor Damura agreed—but, second, and more importantly, the cultural significance of the containers was lost if the contents were not themselves appropriate to the container.

The judge wanted to know if that meant that a bottle of artistic value either lost or gained such value if it was filled with something else—sand, say.

Yes, that was Professor Damura's conclusion, that unless the substances inside the container corresponded to what the label said, the spiritual value was lost.

The city attorney had a good time with that. Professor Damura's expertise was in calligraphy, was it not? How could a hand-writing expert testify to the "cultural significance" of sand in a bottle—or illegally imported spices, for that matter?

It took a while to clear up that Professor Damura was a world-famous expert on the art of calligraphy, not an expert in reading handwriting samples for the police.

But that was what the city attorney wanted, because now he simply asked if Professor Damura could, from his own expertise, testify that the words on the labels had spiritual or cultural significance?

Only indirectly, because he himself could not read the script itself—

And, of course, the city attorney had huge fun with that answer. What kind of expert cannot even read the label of a spice jar? He was beginning to get off into asking Professor Damura where he got his training when the judge interrupted.

"Your point is made, Attorney," he snapped. "Professor Damura is entitled to an expert *opinion*, and the court will

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take his testimony as opinion, nothing else."

The city attorney smiled, and Professor Damura relinquished the witness chair.

Irv Weller was very nervous testifying. He had been shaken by what the city attorney had tried to do to Damura, but he managed to get his point across (with some help from the judge). These were extraordinary bottles, and, as an expert, he had never seen anything like them, a fact which itself gave them value far beyond what they contained or did not contain.

The city attorney had a good time with that, too. "If I," he asked, "were importing a controlled substance, cocaine, for instance, and did so in an extraordinarily beautiful Oriental vase, would the cultural significance of the artistically extraordinary vase alter the fact that importing cocaine was illegal?"

Weller couldn't answer that, but again the judge ruled that Weller's testimony was opinion.

The city attorney was rather more polite with Dr. Bolton. He allowed him to say his piece—that Guz's Place was a new but well-beloved addition to a minority neighborhood, something certainly *not* contrary to the interests of the United States. He requested that that consideration be included when making a ruling that might close the restaurant down.

"No one will close the place down," the city attorney commented. "The penalty is a fine."

"The fine would beggar them," said Dr. Bolton. "The result is the same. I respectfully request that the court consider the value of a good restaurant to our neighborhood in this case."

The city attorney commented that such considerations were important, but not relevant to the matter of law and fact before the court. Yet, even so, everyone in the courtroom knew that Dr. Bolton had scored a point—it would be no light political matter to close down a restaurant in that neighborhood, especially when there were now *two* black councilmen in the courtroom.

The city attorney wanted to know if Dr. Bolton felt that the value to the neighborhood exceeded the possible danger to the United States that might follow if the spices were contaminated by vermin and parasites.

"Are you suggesting that vermin and parasites are typical of restaurants in black neighborhoods?" Dr. Bolton countered.

The city attorney withdrew the question and allowed Dr. Bolton to step down. The judge thanked Dr. Bolton for his testimony.

Slowly the proceedings wore on. Finally, Patti testified, nervously wringing a jade-colored scarf. Her point was that as an artist—the city attorney didn't challenge that—she *knew* that the containers were works of great art and that what the containers held in them must fit the artistry of the calligraphy and the glasswork.

Sardonically, the city attorney asked her if she could read the labels.

"Yes," she replied very quietly, to everyone's surprise.

"Oh?" the city attorney said. "You are able to read writing that exceeds the skills of a world *expert?*"

"It has nothing to do with Professor

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Damura—" Patti began, but the city attorney interrupted.

"And what do those labels *say*, young lady?" he wanted to know.

She looked at the judge, who nodded at her.

"They speak of light and of odor, and of how the two melt into each other—"

The city attorney cut her off. "My apologies, young lady. I did not speak *clearly* enough. Please tell the Court, if you *will*, the literal and exact meaning of the labels on these—" here, he picked up a blue bottle with twirls "—*spice jars*."

Patti stared at the city attorney. The judge was beginning to speak when she leaned forward intently.

"You speak of literal meanings," she said. "But the meanings are not literal. They concern the craft of spinning together light and odor—a blend that has deep meaning, and one that I may learn to read better someday."

The city attorney laughed. "Indeed so. But—alas—the *law* concerns itself with literal and exact meanings. And I suggest that these labels are not about spinning light and odor together, however that might be done—" and his tone dropped into deepest sarcasm "—but with more *worldly* matters, for example, the fact that these are spice jars, in every *literal* sense of the law—" here he turned to Judge Barsamella "—which have been brought into this country without proper documentation and could, for all we know, contain every kind of controlled substance or disease organism that exists. That, Your Honor, is the crux here: nothing about the extraordinary artistic value of weaving light and smells together, but a simple violation of the ordinance quoted previously. I request that the court rule that the citation was properly issued and holds—" and, then, in a seeming afterthought, he turned back to Patti "—I have no further questions."

Patti stepped down from the witness stand, and even from the back, Timbo and Arky could see that she was shaking. She started to say something to the city attorney, but the court crier prevented her.

"Please take your seat, miss, take your seat," he said.

"We will recess for lunch," the judge announced. "If there is no further testimony, a ruling will be issued at 2:00 this afternoon in this courtroom."

There was no further testimony.

"All stand," the court crier called out, and everyone stood as the judge left the courtroom to return to his private chambers.

When he got there, four messages were waiting for him. One was from Sam Klepko.

Dear Vic, it read, *wanted to let you know that the imported spice case is generating a lot of heat down in D.C. with some real high administration types. Don't know why or what, but my info is pretty good here. We'd better watch our p's and q's on this one. Best to your wife. Sam.*

Hmmm, thought the judge.

The second message was from the chief of the United States Customs in Washington. It said tersely that the citation had been issued wrongly and to consider it withdrawn. Bureaucratic fools, the judge thought. Don't know what they're doing. It was a municipal,

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not federal citation. But, still, a message with implications.

The third was from the governor. Barsamella had had some run-ins with him, so the tone didn't surprise him. It informed him that if he ruled Guz's Place guilty in this case, the Governor's Mansion was prepared immediately to issue a pardon. The judge chuckled. More and more interesting, he thought.

The fourth was a typed note saying that Krylla and John Smith, special assistants to the president of the United States, wished to make a private deposition in the case, concerning the interests of the present administration in this matter. All attention to their deposition would be appreciated, the note continued, and their credentials could be checked by telephoning the White House. Signed, Walter Spelker, Judicial Liaison to the President.

The judge laughed. He turned to his assistant. "Next time I get messages like *these*, bring them into the courtroom," he said, giving him the envelope with the White House seal. "Check this with Spelker, and please tell them to meet me in my private office in ten minutes. Oh, and get the lawyers over here too—but keep them waiting outside."

"Yes, *sir*," said the assistant, and dashed off to the telephone. (And, of course, it just did happen that another assistant overheard the phone call, and he *did* mention it to someone else, so that within ten minutes there were three official rumors why the president of the United States was interested in Guz's spices.)

"Do you want to talk to Spelker, sir?" asked the assistant. "He says these people are authentic."

"Of course," the judge said, adding silently, *you dope*. He took the call in his inner office to thank Spelker for the president's interest and to assure him that the depositions of his assistants would be heard with the highest seriousness. Then he sat back in his large leather swivel chair and laughed.

Real high, eh, Sam? he thought. Overkill, in fact. But it was a curious case. On the face of it, there was no question that he would have ruled against the city, Bolton's argument carrying much more weight with him than it might have with another judge. He believed that neighborhoods are the backbone of a city—and he had always been elected with neighborhood support. Unbidden, a memory of his childhood neighborhood drifted to him—of food, of odors, of ships from far places, smelling of strange spices. *Oregano, eh?* His grandmother's face came before him, and she was smiling.

He pulled his thought back to the present. Assuredly, the waffling of the customs representative indicated that the ordinance had nothing to do with restaurants, but was designed to make importers keep records of what they imported. Not a bad idea, he thought, especially if it comes in carboys. He reached for a very fat reference book on the Schedules and Procedures of the United States Customs Service. There it was, Section 508. Yes, importers, consignees, and their agents had to maintain import records. And local ordinance 117 said the same, even if written in incomprehensible flourishes and

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decorated everywhere with whereinsuches, hereinafterunders, and suchlike.

Then he chuckled. For all the city attorney's unpleasant pyrotechnics, Guz's lawyer had really been much cleverer. Thanks to the lengthy debate that he had initiated about the bottles' functions, the city had never bothered to prove that Guz had imported those bottles in the first place. It was exactly the sort of quiet courtroom competence that Barsamella appreciated. "Let that be a lesson," he murmured to the city attorney. Those people *did* know the law. The city had ended up with no case at all. None.

Again, a woman's face flickered by. His grandmother's? His mother's? For a moment, she looked like Patti. It was the odors, clinging still to the bottles, the blue, red, and golden glass that had, briefly, illuminated his courtroom. He hoped he'd done the right thing in letting the spices into the country—he stopped. He had not yet made any ruling.

The judge smiled, and yellow sunlight drifted past him. Of course he had, and he had ruled against the city. Guz would keep his spices, and the bottles too.

Content, his thought drifted with the sunlight. Curiouser and curiouser: overriding interest at the highest levels, all with one purpose—let the place be. World experts unable to decipher scripts. Spiritual young women. Black councilmen and high powered black church leaders. (And a sentimental judge, he thought with a smile: no, not sentimental. No way *he* was going to let anyone close down a good restaurant.) But, still, it was odd that no one had brought up where the spices were *from*. It's no problem to get import papers, he knew; in all the manifests, and bills of lading, and declarations, you merely say where the cargo is from—and he paused.

That is, his thought continued, if you *want* to say where it's from. If. And if you *don't*—

Again, he smiled. Enough speculation—time to hear the president's people. Might as well string them along for a while too—it isn't every day that you get cases like *this*.

The assistant ushered in Krylla and Smith, and the judge recognized them from the courtroom.

"Our credentials, sir." Krylla handed him a manila envelope.

"Thank you," the judge said, shaking hands with her and with Smith. "No doubt they're in order." He glanced briefly at the photographs, letters, and engraved identification cards in the envelope and handed them back to her.

"Please sit," he said. They all looked at each other for a moment, the judge swiveling around in his large leather chair.

"If you wish," Smith said, "we can make our comments under oath?"

"Not yet," the judge replied. "A sketch first, if you would?"

"Certainly," Krylla said. "First, we apologize for this unusual request in seeking to see you privately rather than testifying in court—" the judge politely brushed the problem aside "—but some matters of national and international security are involved."

I'm sure they are, thought the judge. "Go on."

"In brief, sir," Smith began, "the president has just signed an unusual treaty with the leaders of Guz's people.

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Unusual because its main provisions still remain secret and because it was also signed by several other powers, including the Soviet Union. Among other things, the treaty specifically allows the importation of certain foodstuffs and certain works of art into the United States from Guz's homeland. Furthermore, the treaty permits the import to occur without passing through U.S. customs. Allow us to show you a copy of this section of the treaty—"

Krylla handed him a xerocopy of a page written in three languages—English, Russian, and the graceful cursive script of the spice bottles. The highlighted section said what Smith said it said.

"So," the judge observed, "Guz—or some, ah, colleague—*did* import the bottles. My guess was right: the secrecy of this treaty explains why his lawyer diverted the debate to aesthetics and art. He couldn't simply deny they were imported, now, could he?"

They said nothing, but Smith's grey eyes twinkled.

"Clearly, then," the judge continued, "this section of the treaty voids any statutory need for import papers in this case."

"Yes, sir," Krylla said. "The president believes so."

"An opinion the court cannot dismiss lightly," the judge commented dryly.

Both Krylla and Smith noticed the word *opinion*. Judge Barsamella would take their words as opinion, not as a controlling judgment in the case. They would have to proceed cautiously here.

"It would seem so, sir," Krylla replied. "Yet we also bring the president's opinion that it is not contrary to the interests of the United States to have these spices in Guz's restaurant."

Like the chief of customs and the governor, the judge thought but didn't tell them that. "Why is that?" he asked.

Krylla and Smith looked at each other, wondering how much they could say.

"Let us put it this way," Smith began. "Guz's people are extremely gifted artists in many crafts—glassware and food being two. They are an ancient people, with high technologies, little known to westerners—"

"Nor easterners, if Professor Damura was right that he couldn't translate the writing," the judge observed.

Krylla looked at Smith. *Careful,* she was thinking, *this man is shrewd.*

"Yes, to some easterners too," Smith agreed smoothly. "But I am afraid that international security requires that the location of Guz's people not be discussed."

Watch it, Krylla thought.

*Inter*national? thought the judge. But all he said was that he would accept Smith's word that security issues overrode his curiosity about the origin of the spices.

"It may have to, at least for some months, Your Honor," said Smith. Krylla smiled to herself. OK, Smith was shrewd too. The judge was obviously interested.

"However," Smith continued, "in physical appearance, Guz's people are, well, I might say *curious* to some eyes."

"Rather the way foreigners of color are sometimes curious to some Caucasians," Krylla added, "and were once put in sideshows—or enslaved."

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Well rehearsed, thought Barsamella, though he would have added that his ancestors also were thought odd once. *Well, leave Little Italy out of it*, he added to himself.

"So," Smith continued, "the president decided that when this treaty was signed, there would be no large scale, highly publicized importation from Guz's homeland of works of art—or food, for that matter—lest the appearance of his people elicit racial hatred and fear. Such fears might upset a rather delicate diplomatic balance being worked out between the leaders of Guz's people, the United States, the Soviet Union, and other powers."

"And so," interrupted the judge, "fearing ugly racial reactions, the president decided to let Guz's people put their best foot forward in their food and art, all of which seem extraordinary. And in small unfrightening doses?"

He paused and then asked innocently, "Is *foot* the right word?"

Krylla looked at Smith again as if to say *I told you he was shrewd*.

"Your summary of the president's ideas is excellent, sir," Smith replied, and the judge smiled at how he had avoided the question.

"I have a son stationed down at Goddard Space Center," the judge said. "Interesting rumors down there."

"We have heard some of them, too," Smith replied, also smiling.

"The president isn't afraid of publicity about this case?" the judge asked.

"No, sir," Krylla replied. "We are not afraid of publicity per se—only wholesale misinformation and sensationalism about unusual-looking people."

"Of course," the judge said. *So it's "we" now*, he added mentally. "Well," he said, "I think we have talked enough. Your hope is to weave Guz's civilization into our own quietly and peacefully, by letting it find its own connections and welcomes with its food and art. Certainly *I* will not hinder you! For my purposes, all you need do now is depose under oath, with the two lawyers here, that the president deems the importation of these spices not contrary to the interests of the United States, and that will settle the issue. Is that acceptable?"

"Eminently so, Your Honor. We trust the privacy of these chambers," Krylla said.

"Of course. And I'm glad that this court was not asked to decide any *other* issues pertaining to these spices or to Guz's Place." Half whimsical, half somber, he smiled at the sunlight, then at Krylla. "Something tells me that it will all keep several generations of lawyers arguing quite happily. And bureaucrats." Chuckling, he cocked an eyebrow at them. "*And* federal regulators. But you two have gotten it off in the right direction, and I wish you luck."

"Thank you," murmured Smith. "We appreciate your understanding." Still smiling, the judge called his assistant to get the lawyers.

At 2:00, the courtroom was fairly crowded. It took the judge all of four minutes to throw out the citation. He merely announced that, first, the city had not proven the relevance of ordinance 117 to Guz's Place, and, second, that testimony and depositions heard in court and privately had persuaded him

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that the presence of certain herbs and spices in Guz's Place was not contrary to the interests of the United States. He ruled the citation therefore dismissed.

And in those four minutes, there was not one word at all about the president—which was disappointing.

But the rumors certainly made up for it. The most convincing was that Guz was indeed Old Grandma and that she had been the president's cook for many years—some said she had been the president's *father's* cook—and that when she retired years before, the president just kept his eye out for her. And *he* wasn't going to let the Man close down *her* restaurant, not for some lousy shakedown, no way, not at all. Dr. Bolton had another opinion, shared by the black councilmen: Barsamella was a friend to local people, no matter what race or color they were. A good man.

But whatever it was, everybody approved—and therefore took off to Guz's for a victory celebration with lots of Three Planetses and, of course, Guz's spareribs—no, sorry, Old Grandma's *Presidential* Spareribs.

It was a good party. Everyone toasted each other, ate spareribs, Varjinian Duck, and Pickled Zbod, and acclaimed the wisdom and merit of Judge Barsamella. In fact, the acclamations grew more and more impressive, if vague, the more Three Planetses were drunk. After a while, though, the judge was forgotten, except as a wise figure somewhere in the far distance.

Even the cognoscenti, illuminati, and whatnot were pleased. They *did* like good food, and deep down they wanted good cuisine recognized (though not by that lead-palate, Clam Cannolby). So they made knowing comparisons between Guz's restaurant and the well-known cuisine of upper Thailand, inland Nepal, and equally unlikely places.

Eventually Professor Damura and Irv Weller came in. Weller had spent most of the afternoon fulminating about crude-mouthed city attorneys—and racists to boot; did you hear his comment about weevils in black neighborhoods?—but Damura was philosophical.

"Such men have always existed in all places and times," he said. "They are the unenlightened. If we do not forgive them when they melt the temple bells for swords, then we must understand them—and understand that always new crafts will come."

Weller agreed in theory, but still he was outraged. A difference, perhaps, he pointed out, between westerners and easterners. And soon they were genially wrangling about culture, art, and philosophy while hubbub grew around them.

Arky wanted to know what the national anthem of Guz's homeland was, so they could all sing it.

"It is too crowded for that," the waiter said. "But Guz thanks you for the honor."

Well, consider it sung. And for many years, there were people who swore that they had known the words (but had forgotten them in the meantime).

Then Dr. and Mrs. Bolton came in with some church elders and one of the black councilmen. The councilman made a hard-to-follow speech—hard to follow because it was constantly being interrupted—about the importance of ethnic food for black consciousness—

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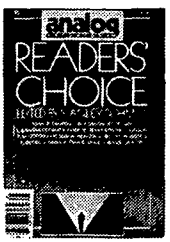

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"That man is running for *office*," Otto commented.

"Yeah, for *president*," replied William, and everyone laughed. So did Arky and Timbo, Arky weepily thinking about singing *We Shall Overcome*, but Timbo shushed her. (In fact, though, Mrs. Bolton said to Arky that God had wanted them to overcome, and for now they had.)

Weller was still pontificating, and Damura's gaze began to wander over the crowd. People of different colors, sizes, even their voices differed. Then, inevitably, his eye was drawn to the bottles. For a moment, their strange writing, with its double inking and delicate swirls, stood out strongly, as if they had been illuminated from within. Suddenly troubled, he looked at his hand for a moment, then at Weller's. What kinds of hands had drawn the scripts, he thought, or made the glass? What new meanings would they bring with their spices, their food, their strange writing? Troubled still, his memories turned to the western ships that had broken the isolation of the East, bringing centuries of change and pain with them . . . but again his eye was drawn to the bottles. Then a gentler thought came. Warships do not carry great art with them, nor do warriors open friendly little restaurants. He smiled at the bottles, nestled safely now in their carved wooden cabinet. It would be well. Just as Patti will create, so will we learn many new things—many things. Still smiling, he turned his attention back to Weller. Suddenly, he felt at peace.

But as yet, neither Jeff, Sue, nor Patti had arrived. When they did, Patti looked exhausted, and Jeff and Sue worried.

"She's been crying and laughing all afternoon," they told Arky.

"I'm all right," Patti said. "But I was afraid to come here—maybe the lights are gone."

But they weren't. Patti found them in the bottles, and they were dancing again—green and wine-red and blue in the bottles. Slowly and delicately, she felt the stem of the Three Planets glass, *her* glass now, for the waiter had given it to her for her help.

As she looked, the weaving of the light blurred with the tracery of the script, and the script, too, seemed to glow, sometimes faintly, sometimes more strongly, the light chasing itself in illuminated tendrils of writing to separate, rejoin, and separate, shifting, dancing, chasing itself in delicate curves and whorls and spirals. . . .

"You are looking at Varjinian script," a voice next to her said.

She turned. It was the exotic woman they had seen in court.

"I'm Krylla," the woman said.

"I'm Patti."

"We know," Krylla said. "Your testimony was impressive." She smiled.

The grey-eyed man with Krylla also smiled. "John Smith," he said to Patti. Briefly, she smiled at him and then turned back to the woman.

"It is alive," Patti said. "You understand that?"

"Yes," said Krylla.

"There's nothing like it on Earth," Patti continued. "Not at all."

"You are quite correct," Smith said. "It is not from Earth."

"Then *where?*"

"Call it Mars, if you like," Krylla replied. "Or far further than that. But

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the glasscraft is very old—thousands of years. Guz's people have woven glassware for thousands of years—and the light *is* alive."

"You see well," Smith said. "And we feel that you should begin to learn that craft."

"How did you know—" Patti began, and than stopped herself. "Oh. Of course, you know the waiter. He must have told you."

"Yes, he did," Krylla said. "He said that you made the light sculpture over there—" and she pointed. Next to it, no doubt accidentally, someone had placed a Three Planets glass. It glowed in the reflected light from Patti's sculpture, but the light in the sculpture was different—

"The light has *moved*," Patti whispered. "It's gone to live in the sculpture—"

"The light knows that it has a new home," Krylla replied, "as perhaps you will for a while."

"Me?" said Patti.

"Of course," said Smith. "*Of course* you."

"Yes," said Krylla, "you will travel to the home of Guz's people and learn the craft of weaving Varjinian glass." And she smiled and put her arm around Patti.

Patti dropped her head and then looked up at Krylla and Smith. "Oh, yes," she said. "*Yes.*"

She stood up. "I have to look." She pushed her way to the sculpture. A man was sitting at the table next to it, but a chair was empty.

"May I sit for a moment?" Patti asked.

"By all means," the man said. He was writing something, and paid her no attention. Momentarily, his lapel pin distracted her—it seemed to be a miniature gold clam—but she dismissed it, turning to the lights, watching them run up and down, chasing themselves in their new home. *A new home?* she thought. *Like me . . .*

She turned, wondering, smiling . . . and for a moment, her eyes flickered to what the man was writing. She read it.

"Food: *****

"Good news, restaurant hunters: Guz's Place. The Steak with Vuzd Sauce is uppermost food—'tawny' is the word they use around here for the dominant flavor. You say you don't know what *vuzd* is? Well, you will.

"They also say that Guz was the president's cook—and that the president still keeps his eye on the place. And he should, because Guz's food is out of this world—"

Patti smiled. *So it is,* she thought and, forgetting him, she saw starlight—spiralling, shifting, living starlight—dancing all around her in infinite space. ■

●Fortunately for serious minds, a bias recognized is a bias sterilized.

Haydon

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ON BEANPOLES AND DRUM-MEN

Martyn J. Fogg

We've long assumed that organisms would grow differently on worlds of different gravity—but *how* differently?

A Friend's Fracas with the Press

There is little interest in the U.K. for space science, neither from the government nor the media. The government is seemingly interested only in communications satellites and "star wars," the media in disasters or titillating sensationalism. Nobody, however, could have predicted the miniature storm that blew up in October 1987 after the opening of the Institute of Space Biomedicine at Sheffield University, at which many prominent international specialists were present.

A report by Andrew Veitch, medical correspondent of *The Guardian*, set the ball rolling. His column in the October 21 issue was headed *"Tall story of men living on the Moon."*

And it went on to proclaim, *"The men in the Moon will be a race apart: 36 feet tall with bones so thin that they will need anti-pressure vessels for vacations on Earth. Human Martians, reared under greater gravity, will be comparative dwarves at about 15 feet."*

Who on earth, or off it, was the crank behind such ridiculous statements you may ask. Veitch, in his exclusive, went on to spill the beans!

"The predictions, from a London University space scientist Dr. Richard Taylor yesterday, are only slightly fanciful. The first Soviet and U.S. experiments suggest that humans will swiftly adapt to conditions on the high frontier. But just how nobody knows."

After a paragraph or two on "pigs in space," Veitch returned to the supposed prognostications of Dr. Taylor.

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"Dr. Taylor, and other leading space scientists, believe humans will adapt to living in space.

" 'It sounds like a joke, but children born on the Moon could grow to be 36 feet high. Children on Mars will be 15 feet. Those are the changes we might expect.' "

I know Dick Taylor well; he likes a good joke, and while his statements are often unorthodox, or even outrageous, they are rarely unqualified. He was indeed another embarrassed victim of selective reporting. Forget the new institute, everybody wanted to know about beanpole men on the Moon—his phone did not cease ringing for a week! Taylor was interviewed by various TV and radio stations and was able to, in some degree, set the record straight. Then Anton Antonowicz, the science correspondent of the *Daily Mirror*, one of our more "popular," that is to say down market newspapers, contacted him. Taylor agreed to be interviewed, so long as he was reported accurately.

To say that the resulting article, which appeared on November 6, was sensationalism at its most blatant is no understatement.

It was headed, *"He's 15 ft. tall with legs like a chicken. . . ."*

Under which was boldly printed, next to a picture of an enormous thin humanoid staring down at an American astronaut, *"Is THIS our man on Mars? Yes says our top space doctor!"*

Antonowicz continued, *"Imagine a human child born on Mars. It's 5 ft. tall, with a barrel chest, huge heart and legs pink and thin as a chicken's.*

"By the time it's an adult it will have grown into a 15 ft. giant.

"Imagine its cousin, born on the Moon, 12 ft. tall at birth and destined to measure three times that as an adult.

"Both must live in massive greenhouses to protect themselves from the harsh alien conditions outside. . . . The stuff of science fiction you'd say. But no, this is the future of the human race, or at least it is according to . . . space scientist Dr Richard Taylor."

Whatever next?

"We can imagine these giant, chicken-legged Martians and Moonmen.

"If gravity is the decider, then men on the Moon—where gravity is six times less than Earth's—would naturally grow six times as high. . . . It will be a painful, tragic development. Many people will die crippled deaths before evolution or genetic engineering gets it right."

And there was more like it, filling a full page feature.

I phoned Taylor up the same afternoon. "Dreadful isn't it?" He said, agreeing with me. "They hardly reported anything of real substance I said at all; the Institute was mentioned only once."

"They seem merely to have rehashed the original *Guardian* story," I said.

"Yes," Taylor sounded a bit breathless, "I've made no progress at all."

Space and the "Biology Barrier"

I suppose we shouldn't be too hard on the press though. It does seem that for most people science has to be pulped almost out of recognition before being digestible. *Analog* readers, however, do not need to be so patronized.

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I'll return to what Taylor really said shortly. But first of all, let us consider what is the relevance of space biomedicine to the future of the human race. Most of you who are reading this probably believe that human civilization will not stay totally Earth-bound forever. However, there are still wide gaps in our knowledge of the physiological changes that occur in humans under reduced or zero gravity, and scarcely any ideas of how to prevent them. It may be that human limitations rather than the limitations of any of our machinery will be the major factors preventing rapid colonization of the Solar System. Such a "biology barrier" has already been reached in the aircraft industry, as the human tendency to lose consciousness at accelerations of over five *gee* means that modern fighter planes can no longer be flown to their limits. Space biomedicine is therefore a vital field of enquiry.

Short-term problems experienced by astronauts include motion sickness, a redistribution of blood to the top half of the body, resulting in a swollen face and thinner legs (hence Antonowicz's chickens!), followed by dehydration and loss of between two to four kg. of body fluid. These, however, are minor compared with long term degenerative changes that have been observed. These include a chronic loss of bone calcium, muscle wasting, slow shrinkage of the heart, malformation of red blood cells and a reduction in the efficiency of the immune system. Neither the Soviet Union nor the U.S. has kept humans in space long enough to know whether any of these changes level out, or whether the skeleton in particular would eventually vanish completely. Certainly, the longer an astronanut remains in space, the harder it will be for him to return to the one *gee* of Earth without serious harm. At the moment, the reasons for the physiological degeneration seen so far are not understood. Thus, the space biomedics still cannot tell us whether it really will be safe for people to endure long space voyages under conditions of microgravity, or whether astronauts returning from a Mars trip will be in danger of fracturing their bones by merely pushing away from the wall of their spacecraft.

What is also unknown is how these changes would progress under reduced but non-zero gravity, such as on the Moon and Mars. Is there a gravity cut-off point, below which the degeneration proceeds at the rate already observed for zero *gee?* Or might the effects be more linear, with the rate of degeneration being some function of the local gravity? We are equally ignorant of how the pattern of growth and development might proceed. Might it be that adults could live on the Moon quite happily, but their children would grow up seriously deformed? Answers to these questions will have profound implications as to whether we will be able to inhabit bases on the Moon and colonize Mars, or whether new human species will have to be genetically pre-designed to survive on other worlds.

What Was Really Said

This then brings me back to what Taylor said at the opening of the U.K. Institute for Space Biomedicine. He has been kind enough to provide me with

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his account of the conversation in which he was speculating on the size that human beings might grow to on both the Moon and Mars.

Veitch was particularly interested in the problem of growth. The various zero *gee* embryonic development projects being discussed fascinated him. However, he could not appreciate fully why the investigation of how the pattern of growth and development might be affected by reduced gravity, was considered to be necessary before humans could live permanently away from Earth.

To help him visualize the type of reasoning behind space biophysical research programs, Taylor developed a "thought experiment" argument as follows:

Consider an organism, say a human growing on the Earth. The size of a normal individual member of the human species is determined genetically and can vary between different gene pools, that is racial groups, by a fairly wide but not unlimited range, eg 1.4 to 2.3 m. This genetic determination of size means that under Earth conditions humans neither fail to grow, nor do they continue to grow in an unlimited way.

What tells any individual human animal to cease growing? We do not know for certain, but a whole complex of factors is probably involved. However, we can conjecture that this complex is likely to have a single, or main, triggering factor. The most obvious mechanism for limiting the size of an individual would be for growth to cease when the averaged structural stress within the animal reached some genetically predetermined value. The bones which make up the skeleton provide an ideal stress measuring system, for they must carry stresses generated both by the weight of the animal and by the muscles, which provide the tensions necessary to hold the animal's structure together and to move it about.

Thus if we suppose it is possible that it is a specific combination of weight and muscular stress level that switches off the growth mechanism, we can ask ourselves the question, "What would happen to a terrestrial organism growing under conditions of reduced gravity? Would it develop normally and survive?" Taylor emphasized that this was important as the costs of even temporary colonization of Mars would be so high that only young people, i.e. of breeding age, were likely to be sent so that they would have the longest possible "Mars-stay-working-life." In these circumstances many would want to lead a normal family life and have children. But could we allow the risk?

What then might be the result of altering the strength of the gravitational switch? For the purpose of illustration only, it is valid to make a great simplification, we may ignore the alteration in muscle stress on the skeleton which changes with skeletal size. Thus on the Moon, where *gee* is one sixth of the terrestrial value, the "weight" stress signal would arrive six times later than on Earth. This might lead to some wild conjectures as to humans of enormous height and size, but in reality it would not be correct to assume that this would happen. For one thing, inertial forces and muscular stresses affect the issue as to the final size of the organism. Size

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is not controlled solely in a linear manner by the local value of *gee*. The whole point, however, is that a major change in the "stop-growth" signal, due to the change in the value of *gee*, might lead to a severe, possibly even lethal distortion of the normal growth pattern.

Veitch asked about growth on Mars. Taylor's reply was that as the local value of *gee* was almost two-fifths of the terrestrial value, the gravitational "stop-growth" signal would occur two and a half times later than on Earth. Thus again some marked degree of growth pattern disruption could be expected to occur. Veitch asked if this meant that bones could grow to be six times as long on the Moon and more than twice as long on Mars as they did on Earth? Taylor replied that this would not be the case. Such a severe distortion could not happen—indeed it would be lethal if it was a "real" possible consequence of lower gravity. Six times greater growth on the Moon and over double growth on Mars was not a "real" possibility, merely an illustrative outcome of a gross simplification of the thought experiment.

Well, I've told you what followed . . . . *"Tall story of men living on the moon,"* was considered sufficiently titillating by the editor of *The Guardian* to be published as serious speculation. In their enthusiasm however, both reporters missed one thing that would have made their articles even more shocking. If human height scales inversely with *gee*, then human colonists who were to settle a higher gravity environment than the Earth, say on a massive terrestrial planet around a nearby star, would end up as weird and severely stunted barrel-shaped creatures. These 'drum-men' would stand as little chance of surviving as the beanpoles discussed previously.

A More Realistic Scaling

Absurd as these examples are, they serve to illustrate that we are still left with the distinct possibility that humans developing in alien environments with differing local gravity will suffer a systematic distortion to their physical form. As the generations pass, humans, and the organisms brought with them, might rapidly acquire adaptive variations to their size and shape, even without the short-cut of genetic engineering. Such a sudden evolutionary pressure would be expected to generate a new species of the Genus Homo at every colonization site where the local gravity differs appreciably from that of the Earth's. By the end of the next century the process might already have begun.

Certainly, Taylor's thought experiment of linking growth linearly with gravity was, as he had pointed out, far too simple for any real situation. The growth problem is probably so complex that theoretical speculations alone are unlikely to come up with true predictions of how growth and development might scale with varying *gee*. However, there is no harm in having a go. By using some simple dimensional analysis I have created a more "realistic" scaling scheme that results in humanoids of modest and "sensible" dimensions that would be less likely to die deformed shortly after birth or suffer serious risk of falling apart.

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The following dimensionless relationship is roughly descriptive of large land-based terrestrial organisms:

modulus of elasticity × diameter² = constant gravity × density × height³

Symbolically:

$$\frac{Ed^2}{g\rho l^3} = \text{constant}$$

On the Earth, E and ρ, the physical characteristics of the tissues themselves, are found to vary very little and can be assumed to be roughly constant; g of course is also a fixed quantity. Thus we are left with the square of the diameter proportional to the cube of the height: $d^2 \propto l^3$. This is known as the square-cube law and reflects the general rule that, on comparing different organisms, thickness scales with height or length raised to the power ⅔. This is why oaks appear more massively built than willows and gorillas more thick set than gibbons.

However, we also wish gravity to be a variable. Thus:

$$g \propto d^2 l^{-3}$$

We want to separate d and l, but there is no simple solution. However, this *is* a speculation and so let us adopt an empirical, or 'gut feeling' approach and derive a relation that at least *looks* satisfactory (something that cannot be said for the Taylor thought experiment.) A good solution is $l \propto g^{-1/6}$ and $d \propto g^{1/4}$. Values of l and d obtained from these proportionalities, fed back into Equation 3 give back the original value of g. Now we have derived tentative scaling relationships for length and width, many other interesting parameters can be obtained. The full list is given below.

Length:	$l \propto g^{-1/6}$
Width:	$d \propto g^{1/4}$
Mass:	$m \propto g^{1/3}$
Weight:	$w \propto g^{1/3}$
Stress:	$P \propto g^{5/6}$
Muscular Strength:	$S \propto g^{1/3}$

Any of you with a calculator that handles fractional powers should now be able to experiment with the formulae. However, before doing so, a little further clarification is necessary. Note that the formulae are all normalized to 1 *gee*. Inserting g = 1 into any of them produces 1 as an answer and so we are scaling proportions relative to a 1 *gee* organism.

What happens now to our Moon and Marsmen? Keying g = ⅙ into the length formula gives a scaling factor of 1.35; g = 0.4 gives a length scaling factor of 1.16. Thus we obtain heights of about 8 ft. and 7 ft. respectively, far more reasonable than the 36 ft. and 15 ft. mentioned in the press! What is also interesting is that, as one might expect, these two characters turn out to be slimmer and of lower mass and muscular strength than terrestrial humans.

Table one shows scaling factors calculated for gravities between ⅙ to 1.5 g. This is the likely range that will be encountered by human pioneers as mankind colonizes the Solar System and nearby stars. I have performed Computer simulations of the formation of extra-solar planetary systems that indicate that the masses of habitable planets will lie between about 0.4 to 2.8 times the mass of the Earth, with gravity rang-

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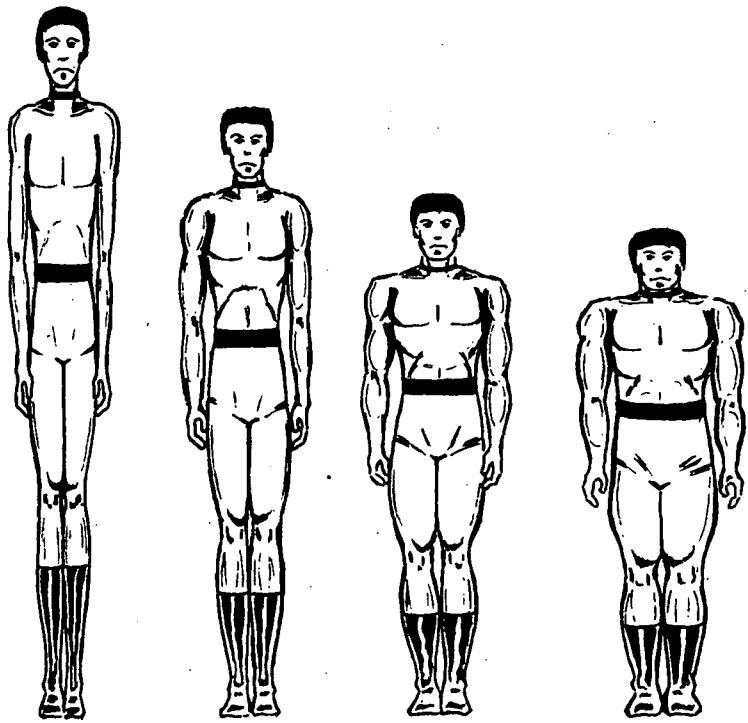

g = 1/6 **0·4** **1** **1·5**

Locality.	Gravity.	Length.	Width.	Mass. & Str.	Weight.	Stress.
	g	l	d	m & s	w	P
Moon	0.17	1.34	0.64	0.55	0.09	0.23
Mars	0.38	1.17	0.79	0.72	0.28	0.45
	0.5	1.12	0.84	0.79	0.40	0.56
Venus	0.88	1.02	0.97	0.96	0.84	0.90
Earth	1.0	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
	1.2	0.97	1.05	1.06	1.28	1.16
	1.5	0.93	1.11	1.14	1.72	1.40

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ing between about 0.7 to 1.5 g. Heavier planets tend to undergo a runaway accretion of gas and become uninhabitable mini-gas giants, smaller worlds would need extensive terraforming. The formulae cannot be used to speculate how humans might adapt to living on bodies smaller than the Moon, such as comets and asteroids. The scaling relationship is bound to break down at some low value of *gee* for when g = 0, length becomes infinite, and width becomes infinitesimal, which are obvious absurdities.

The illustration shows what some of these "extraterrestrial humanoids" might look like. None of their physical characteristics appear grossly distorted, and I think you will agree that none of them look intrinsically unbelievable. The gravity scaling rules I have presented represent a good compromise, producing organisms that are neither too tall nor too massive. Whether or not they provide a guide as to the future of extraterrestrial man I cannot say, I have still simplified or ignored many factors. However, it does seem that in gravitational fields that differ markedly from 1 *gee*, scaled humanoids would perform better in such attributes as dexterity or strength than their terrestrial cousins.

Whether or not we will have to wait for biological evolution to perform the changes, or whether advances in genetic engineering and a relaxation of some of our scruples will allow us to design and create humans for altered gravities, will become clear over the next century. It is space biomedicine, a discipline that lives largely in the shadow of the more glorious astronomy and astronautics, that holds the key. It is sobering to think that mankind may be standing on the threshold of a major speciation event, and that in the millennia to come many different human races may look back upon this age as their time of genesis. ■

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● The difficulty with a research grant is that if you solve the problem, you're out of a job. Now, *that's* a problem!

Kelvin Throop III

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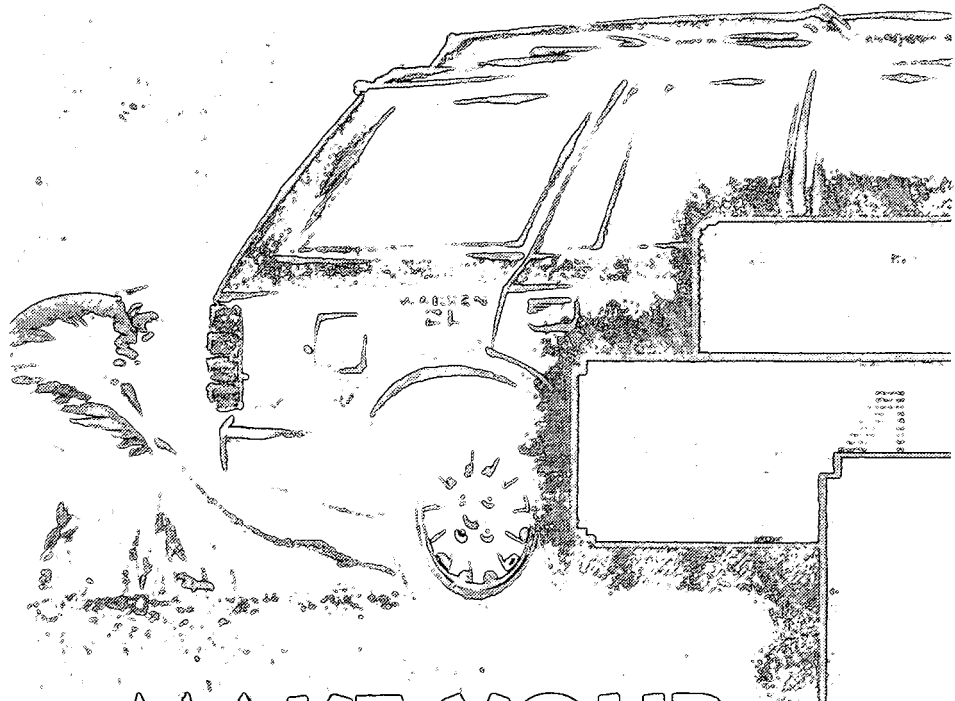
William R. Warren, Jr.

When can a future technology have present applications?



MAKE YOUR OWN UNIVERSE

Pauline Ashwell

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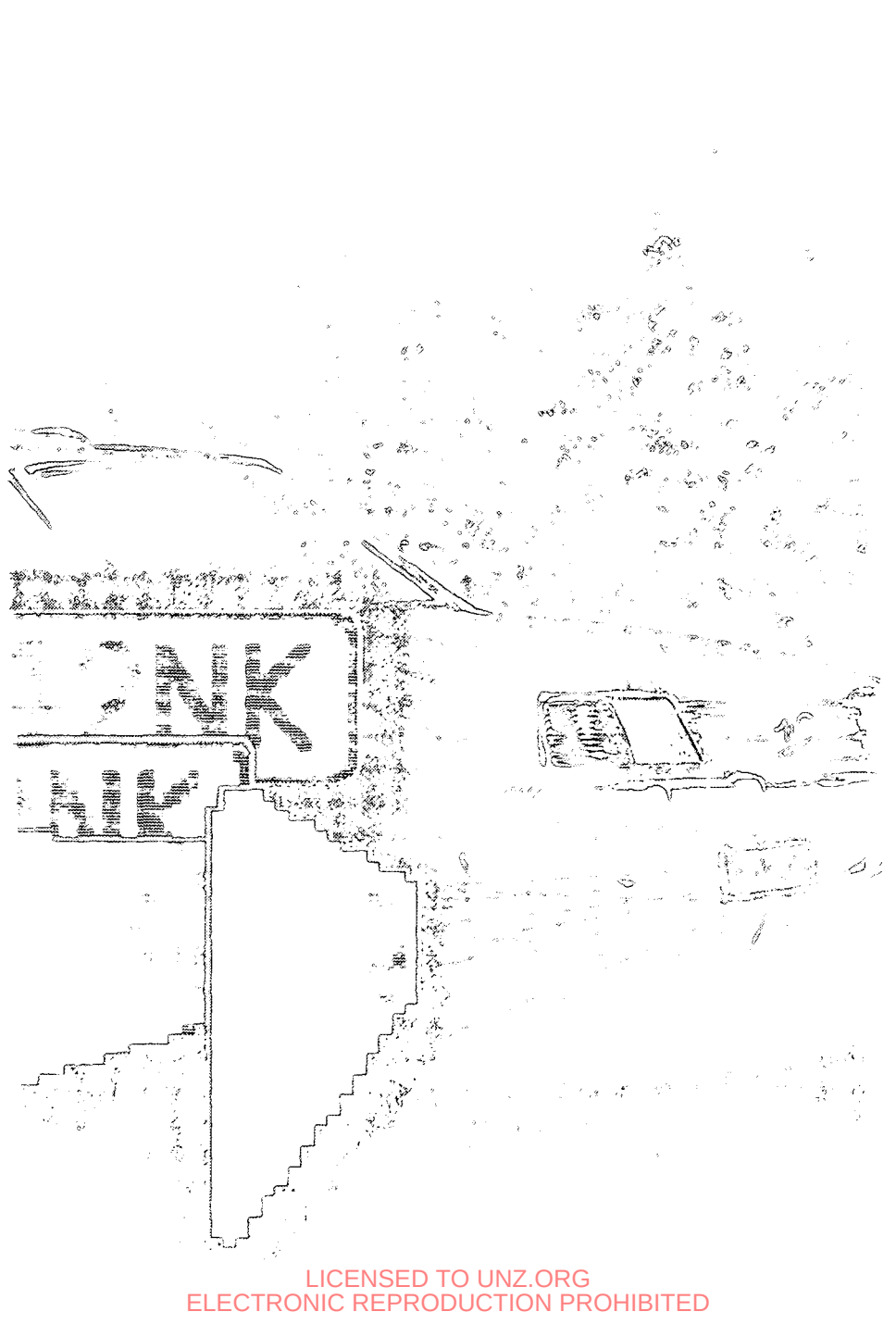

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"Tell me about this new planet you're moving to," I said brightly.

Dave returned to his present surroundings with a visible jerk.

"This—? Oh. If you like. What do you want to know?"

Actually I was just trying to keep the conversation going, or rather, start it up again. As a science fiction fan of more than thirty years' standing I obviously ought to have found the knowledge that my companion would shortly—in four months' time, or less—become a colonist on a newly terraformed planet perfectly fascinating, but I had already had an overdose of science-fiction-turned-fact for that week.

We were in the garden of The Fighting Cocks, a pub just outside the edge of the town. Dave had taken me there for dinner, to return my hospitality — having had the use of my spare room for the last two nights—and to celebrate a small and very private triumph. Over the avocados, and on into the main course, we had discussed in ribald detail the visit of the organizing committee of the District Science Fiction Convention to the old cinema, now converted to a conference center, in which I proposed that the convention should be held. They had gone all over it—two of the shrewdest people I knew and at least four of the nosiest, the two groups not being mutually exclusive — and they hadn't suspected a thing. The secret of Thingummy Hall (the committee member who first mentioned the place has a bad memory for names) had survived.

Looking back, my worries on that score had been excessive. Whatever else the committee might find to cavil at, it wasn't likely to occur to them that when they passed through the inner doors of what used to be the Plaza Cinema they were entering another Universe. Rather a small one, I gathered, and artificial; made and colonized by humans; but complete with three dimensions of space and one of time that were quite independent of our own.

I glanced at Dave. He certainly looked as though he belonged very solidly in *this* world and time. In his sports shirt and jeans he fitted his surroundings perfectly. . . . or he had until a few minutes ago. While I was distracted by dessert he had somehow developed a gloom more appropriate to an amateur production of Samuel Beckett than a pub.

My reminder about his plans for relocation had done nothing much to lighten it. Dave roused himself to recite a few statistics—gravity 0.97 gee; atmosphere 18 percent oxygen; land-mass 32 percent of the surface, made up of three continents and some largish islands; fauna and flora post-Pleistocene with poisonous plants and parasites left out.

"By the way," he said suddenly, "are any of your admirers the jealous sort?"

I blinked.

"Chap by himself at a table to your left, beside the laburnum tree. Very interested in one of us, and I don't imagine it's me."

With revived interest he dug his fork into a profiterole.

I glanced towards the table by the laburnum. The occupant was a man in his forties, inconspicuously dressed, with a thin face, not bad-looking, and

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mouse-colored hair starting to recede from a high forehead.

"Nobody I know," I said.

The man turned his head. After a moment, his eyebrows rose slightly in polite enquiry. I looked away. He was certainly interested in our table.

"Are you sure it's not you he knows?" I said. "You were born somewhere round here, weren't you?" His accent was muted, but unmistakable.

Dave's face went momentarily blank, but after a moment he answered cheerfully enough; "Well, yes. At Endswith —" a village seven miles from the town "—in 1973."

Fifteen years ago? He had to be within a year or two of my own age, and I'm forty-two . . .

. . . Caught again.

Dave was a time-traveler, more or less—he preferred to call it "Time-hopping," on the grounds that the only way to *travel* in time was straight forward at a steady rate of sixty minutes to the hour.

The man-made Universe in which he lived was known to the inhabitants as Elsewhere. How it had been created I had not the faintest idea, but the event had taken place somewhere on Earth, so that Elsewhere's time-line and that of Earth had just one instant in common. Because of this "anchor-point"—and again I had no idea how the thing worked—the two Universes could be brought together at a "contact-plane." With the right apparatus, this became a Gate through which a person in Elsewhere could enter any moment of time, at any place on Earth.

In short, having been recruited into Elsewhere when he was nineteen, he could now, aged forty or thereabouts, return to a time fourteen years after he was born, just as he could come to a place seven miles away. . . . No, that analogy made it *more* unbelievable, not less . . .

"You told me you were here five years ago," I reminded him.

"Five years on my personal time-line," he reminded me. "Twenty years ago in this one, and I was working twelve hours a day installing Gates and translocators. The only people around were from Elsewhere's Purchasing Department. I don't think I spoke to a single local, except one or two barmen and the odd bus conductor; certainly not to anybody who would remember me now."

The brush with the Unknown, slight though it was, seemed to have restored his spirits. It had set mine on the downgrade.

"We might have coffee back at the flat," I suggested.

Dave swallowed the last forkful of cream, and agreed.

During the return to the converted Victorian mansion of which I occupied one-fourth, I noticed that Dave paid a good deal of attention to the rear-view mirror; but for the last mile of the journey there was no car behind us at all.

"Is there any reason why anyone should follow us?" I asked.

Dave shrugged. "Not that I know of." He came round behind the car, probably to open the door for me, but I was already out—I never remember to wait for these attentions.

When I brought the coffee into my

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living room Dave was lying back in his chair and staring with gloomy intensity at nothing in particular. He roused himself to thank me for the coffee mug and said, "I think it's time I moved to a hotel."

"Not on my account," I said.

"Thanks, but I think I ought to be closer to Schocker and Co."

Since I didn't know what, exactly, he needed to do with the small group of extrauniversal refugees living in the upper regions of Thingummy Hall, I didn't argue.

The decision did not appear to have cheered him. I waited a couple of minutes, then said, "If you told me what kind of dumps you were in I might be able to help you out."

"Dumps?" said Dave. "Oh . . . sorry. I'm not being good company, am I?"

"Don't try and put me in the wrong," I said sternly. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing much . . . No, really. Little dose of homesickness, that's all."

"For Endswith?" I said, surprised.

"*Endswith?* That's a dump if you like. I got out as soon as I could, after my father died. No, I was thinking of Elsewhere."

Stupid. Of course, Elsewhere had been home to him for more than twenty years.

I said, even more stupidly, "Well, you'll be going back presently, won't you?"

"No," said Dave bleakly. "It isn't there any more."

I think I gasped—not so much at the statement as at my own idiocy. I *knew* that the artificial Universe was about to come to an end—it was one of the first things I learned about the reason for Dave's involvement with Thingummy Hall. But I thought—

"I don't mean the Big Bang," said Dave. "That won't happen for nearly four months after I get back. Elsewhere was a lot more than a collection of Units. . . . You remember what Le Corbusier said a house ought to be? Elsewhere was the most perfect machine for living that was ever designed. It had everything people could need—not just for material needs, there was scope for creativity and curiosity and fun and adventure and . . . devotion, I suppose. I worked on it for twenty years and I loved the bloody place.

"Now it's gone. Except for half a dozen Units with three hundred people dashing around in them, so taken up with what they're doing they don't have time to say hello. They'll wring the last bit of use out of it and go, and that'll be the end. In a few years no one will remember it."

I had already put my foot in it so thoroughly that one more time didn't seem to matter. Even so, I hesitated before saying it: "I suppose there's no way the Big Bang could be . . . prevented?"

Dave looked at me in astonishment. Then he gave what sounded like a genuine laugh. "You mean, can't I put together a few second-hand components and reverse the flow of current in something or other and make time run backwards until Elsewhere is new again?"

"Whatever it takes," I said crossly. "I don't understand how you know it's going to break up, let alone when it will happen. Why wasn't it made stronger, in the first place?"

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"It isn't a question of strength," said Dave.

"Well, what *is* it a question of? It seems so . . . so *wasteful* to make a whole Universe so that it only lasts a thousand years."

Dave grinned. "Put like that . . . " The grin died. "The duration was built in, I'm afraid. Matter of fact, we were probably lucky it wasn't just a century or two. Did Schocker tell you *anything* about how Elsewhere came to exist?"

Carl Schocker had been my first contact with Elsewhere, when I went to arrange for the hire of Thingummy Hall (good lord, only a week ago). Communication had been limited, even after I was allowed to find out that the Hall was not what it seemed; for one thing, at that time his English was far from good.

"I got the impression that it was made about a thousand years from now by some sort of Mad Genius who wanted to Get Away From It All," I said.

"Thirteen hundred, and he may have been the sanest man of his time; otherwise that's about right." Dave suddenly noticed his coffee cup, picked it up, and swallowed the contents. "Any more in the pot? . . . Thanks.

"I can't tell the story properly because I don't understand the background. No one from Elsewhere operated within a couple of centuries of that period—not to leave a record anyway—except Sven himself. He wasn't much of a raconteur, and he didn't see the need to explain the setup he'd escaped from, and what he did let fall has been transmitted from person to person over the centuries. That was his name—Sven Rostropovitch.

"From what I can make out, in his birth-time the human race has been pretty well painted into a corner. Life is completely controlled, from birth to cremation—at any rate for the bright ones, anybody who might try to initiate change. I don't know whether that applies world-wide or whether there are free areas; nor whether the principle decision-maker is a dictator, a committee or a computer. Sven probably didn't know himself.

"He was classified as a genius a month after he was born. They've got that sort of thing down pat. Only as a matter of fact the classifier boobed; he should have been put down as an *Unlimited* Genius. I wouldn't blame the classifier, myself; no one in that category had been born since the classification was laid down—it means the sort of brain that crops up once in a millennium. Einstein's the only example I know of, but I'm told Imhotep and Thales qualify. Newton doesn't, not quite—I think he's a bit too comprehensible. Went off his head, too. These were the chaps who took *really* giant steps for mankind, and kept their balance doing it. See?"

I indicated that I saw.

"Kid geniuses aren't brought up by their parents in that place-time. They're put together in suitable-sized groups and trained for the particular job the State needs them to do. Sven's was a ten-group, training to work in spatio-temporal physics.

"The ten-group had a lab and workshop at their disposal. When they were

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about twelve, Sven produced a working Translocator—in fact, two."

"Translocator," I said. "That's the thing you use for getting from one unit of Elsewhere to another, isn't it? And he'd made one himself, just from the theory?"

"From the theory? He'd *invented* the thing. Top physicists of the time didn't understand even when he explained."

"But what *was* it?" I said.

"Well, you could call it a matter-transmitter, I suppose. A matter-shifter would be a better term. You step into a cabinet and tap out the code for your destination and when the door opens you step out there. Don't ask me how it works.

"From the point of view of the supervisor in charge of that ten-group, it indicated that Sven wasn't just a common-or-garden genius like the rest of the group. He was something a lot harder to handle. The procedures were all laid down, though there'd never been occasion to apply them before. Handle With Care, Isolate, Restrict Information, If Necessary Destroy."

"At the age of twelve?" I exclaimed.

"Those people have a real respect for brains. The rules ought to have been in force from the time he was born. They took him out of the ten-group and kept him in solitary . . . except for instructors. They cut down the area of his education and concentrated it on a narrow field—the Translocator and how to increase its usefulness. Only they were too late.

"For one thing, Sven had had experience of companionship, he'd had friends. He was prepared to do just about anything to get them back. For another, living with comparatively few restrictions until he was twelve, he'd somehow picked up enough clues to psychology and social organization to let him pull the biggest con imaginable.

"You know the principle of that? Find out what people *really* want and make them believe they're going to get it. I suppose the new regime brought him into a fair amount of contact with the bosses, and the instructions he got gave him an idea of what bait to hold out—"

"He promised them their own Universe?" I exclaimed.

"No. Just their own worlds, that's all. Self-contained, self-sufficient, luxurious little worlds up in orbit where the general populace couldn't get at them. I don't know whether they were afraid the lower orders would revolt or whether they just didn't want to be bothered with them any more, but that apparently was the secret yearning of the Big Bosses—the ones Sven had to deal with, anyway.

"They'd even had quite a lot of research done. Designs drawn up—"

"There are designs *now*, come to that," I said. "L5 colonies—"

"Big tin cans rotating to provide weight," said Dave disparagingly. "These people have artificial gravity. Sideroplast—that's the hull material—is a lot stronger and less corrodable than aluminium or steel, Their life-support equipment is very nice, and they know a hell of a lot about automation—no need for a crew, even to cook and clean.

"The big snag was that they'd no way of getting their little bits of paradise into orbit. The space program had been dead for centuries. There never had been

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launch vehicles big enough for the job, and to start up the necessary research would take years and need cooperation that they weren't likely to get.

"My guess is that Sven got to hear about it because his Translocator was the perfect answer to another problem —supplying the Units in orbit. It'd also have allowed the occupants to visit the surface when they got bored—the boss man would even be able to commute—"

"Wait a minute," I said. I have read a great deal of science fiction. "How about the orbital speed, potential energy—"

"Irrelevant," said Dave. "The Translocator shifts things across a contact plane between two portions of space-time. Frames of reference don't carry across. . . . Look, don't try to tell me about principles, the thing *works*.

"Sven convinced them he could use a modified Translocator to get the dwelling-Units themselves up into orbit. He designed the machinery that was supposed to do it. There were a few mathematicians and a couple of engineers who thought they understood the Translocator; most of them said that this would work too.

"Enough of the boss types, and the right ones, were sufficiently interested to get man-power and materials allocated for a prototype. It took five years to build it, and Sven modified his designs several times. My guess is that the supervisors just couldn't bring themselves to admit that they didn't understand what the modifications were supposed to do.

"Anyway, the prototype was completed, and everything that could be checked on the ground was checked. Then, a day or two before the official launching, Sven let himself into the Unit by way of a disguised Translocator—the official one had been disabled, they weren't *complete* fools—and threw the switches that were supposed to put the thing into orbit. Instead, it was thrown right out of this Universe, taking a bit of the space-time continuum with it.

"Or maybe it just grew one of its own. The people who think they know won't accept either description, so take your pick."

He stopped, and drank the rest of his coffee at one gulp.

I knew already that my imagination could not cope with the beginning of a new Universe, even a little one. I fastened on something it could understand.

"But he was all alone there, wasn't he?"

"Yes, for a bit. He was used to loneliness. Anyway, he had his own plans for dealing with it. The first thing he did was to make himself a Viewer and go looking—"

I stopped him.

"You've mentioned that before, but I don't know what it is."

Dave gave a martyred sigh.

"It's just what you'd expect—it looks at things in *this* Universe, from Elsewhere. If you want to know how it works, it registers the photons impinging on *this* side of a contact-plane, during the point-instant for which it's been set, and equipment on the other side translates the information into a picture. If you mean, what is it like to use—"

"Yes," I said.

"Well, the ones I know have a big screen that gives full-color pictures about a quarter life-size. You set place

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coordinates and the time that you want on a series of dials, and then steer the view-point around with a sort of joystick. If that sounds easy, it isn't. Chances are you won't recognize the place you want when you get to it, because you're looking at it from an unexpected angle. And that's using a refined model, with computer assistance and an instructor to help who's had twenty years on the job and a thousand years of improvements behind him. Sven made the first one *ever*. I don't know what his controls were like, but he was trying to do the sort of thing that can take weeks or months for an experienced operator. He can't even have had a proper system of coordinates, because—Never mind. He didn't find them. So—"

"Find who?" I asked.

Dave blinked at me. "His friends. The kids who'd been in his ten-group. Didn't I say?"

I made more coffee while I was thinking it out. I wouldn't sleep that night—but I had a feeling that I wouldn't, in any case. Dave apparently wasn't worried about sleeping. He drank the new coffee with enthusiasm.

"So what did Sven do then?" I asked.

"He went looking for company. The story runs that he just picked people up off the streets and tried to talk to them, and then put them back. Finally he found one who didn't have hysterics and knew enough to be useful."

I thought briefly about the feelings of a person "picked up from the streets" into a strange Universe, but didn't interrupt.

"He'd got quite a long way back from his own period before he found her. The takeover by the organization that ruled in his time was just beginning. She knew one of the leaders of the opposition—not a politician, I suppose you'd call him a historical philosopher. I imagine he was pretty dismayed by what Sven had to tell him of future developments. Look, this is going to turn into a five-volume epic if I'm not careful. This man got together a group of friends, and they and their families moved into Elsewhere, and that was the start of our population. At the beginning, of course, they spent most of the time arguing about plans, and after a bit Sven got bored and went off about his own affairs. He'd taken over another Unit and fitted up—"

"Half a minute," I said. "Where did he get a second Unit? You've only mentioned one."

Dave hit himself on the forehead.

"Hell, that was the reason why I started this story in the first place . . . Sven must have had some idea of future developments right from the start, or he wouldn't have done it. When he designed the apparatus that took the first Unit out of this continuum, he incorporated a—it's a bit diffcult to explain."

He sat scowling to himself for a couple of minutes, periodically making odd gestures with his fingers as though he was trying to illustrate something to himself. I poured more coffee. He drank, and heaved a profound sigh.

"Ever come across the idea that at any given moment people and objects are three-dimensional cross-sections of events in four dimensions? I mean—existence is a sort of long tube

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extending from the past to the future, with the present moment moving along it? Good. The effect of what Sven did was to take the long tube of *Elsewhere's* existence, right when it began, and sort of bend it into thousand-year loops. Or maybe—no, never mind. In practice, what it meant was that when the Unit's main Translocator was activated, it shifted the user to another cross-section of its own existence, *x* thousands of years ahead . . . Which meant, in effect, that every thousand-year stretch of the Unit's existence acted as a separate Unit."

As a rule, my brain absorbs statements easily. But just occasionally it comes up against something really unmanageable, and goes on strike. On these occasions it helps to get up and do something.

"I'm going to get my slippers," I said.

When I got back. Dave was slumped in his chair and scowling at the toes of his loafers.

I sat down and said, "If all the Units in Elsewhere are really the same Unit, what happens when you build something into one? Does it appear in all the later ones?"

Dave said, "When you put something in this room and take it out again, does it turn up again a year later?"

I thought for a bit, and said, "Some time all these lengths of Elsewhere's existence are going to link up. I mean, at the end of a thousand years—" I came to a stop.

Dave said, "Yes. At the end of a thousand years, suddenly, all the contents of all the occupied Units—and there are at least a thousand—are going to be in one Unit. Some of them will be trying to occupy the same bit of space. You're a science fiction fan, you know what that means.

"*That's* the Big Bang . . . That's how we know when Elsewhere will come to an end. It was built in from the start and there's damn all anyone can do."

When I left the office on Monday afternoon a man was standing alongside my car. He looked familiar, but before I could decide where I had seen him before he displayed a police warrant card and I had something else to think about.

My job brings me into contact with the County police from time to time—usually at sergeant level, and concerning parking and traffic control for County Council functions—but this was apparently Chief Inspector Lytton of the local CID.

"What can I do for you, Chief Inspector?" I enquired.

He looked at me with a kind of impersonal interest, as though he was trying to decide where I fitted in some classification system of his own.

"I need to get in touch with a certain person, Miss Marsh, and I believe you can help me to do so."

"What's his name?" I said. "Or is it her name?"

"I don't in fact know what name he is going under at present—"

My personal alarm system started to prickle.

"—But you were seen in his company yesterday evening."

—And by this man, too. Dave's story had overlaid the memory of the man

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sitting under the laburnum, or I would have recognized him at once.

"Are you referring to my cousin?" I asked coldly.

"Was he with you at The Fighting Cocks at approximately nine o'clock yesterday evening?"

"He was, yes."

"May I have his name, please?"

I said baldly, "Why?"

His eyes examined my face thoughtfully. "It is every citizen's duty to help the police, Miss Marsh."

"What crime are you investigating, Chief Inspector?"

"The kidnapping and murder of Jenny Burns."

I gasped. The body of Jenny Burns, five years old, had been found in a ditch six weeks before. I said, "Are you saying that my cousin had something to do with—"

"No, Miss Marsh, merely that he may be in a position to give useful information."

"But he wasn't in this part of the country then!"

"He could still be in a position to help the investigation. I think he is."

How much did I really know about Dave—?

I said, "My cousin left this morning. I don't know where he is at present, but he will probably get in touch with me. When he does, I'll ask him to call you."

"I need to see him as soon as possible. Give me his name, please, and whatever you know about his probable movements, and I can trace him."

I said, "No. He's traveling on business for his firm. I don't propose to upset his schedule without a lot more reason than what you've given me so far."

He considered me for what seemed a long moment, with no expression at all on his face; then he nodded slightly and walked away.

I drove home, trying to decide whether I should get in touch with Dave. It was true that he had left that morning, and that I didn't know where he was; he might have taken a room in either of the two hotels within easy reach of Thingummy Hall. . . . I was startled, therefore, to see him emerge from my spare room as I entered the flat; especially since he had returned my spare key.

"I've set up a Translocator at the back of the cupboard," he stated. "Do you mind?"

I brushed past him and opened the cupboard. It contained two suitcases, an old mackintosh and my winter coat encased in polythene.

"Nothing to see," said Dave. "Operates between here and Schocker's office—no need for controls."

"But why—?" I said.

"Thought it might be needed. Someone's been snooping around."

"How did you know?" I exclaimed.

"Met that neighbor of yours, Mrs. Whatsit, the one who used to be a statistician, in the High Street. Told me someone was round this morning just after you left. Claimed to be doing some sort of market survey, but she says the questions weren't right."

"I've had a snooper too," I said, leading him into the sitting room. I told him about Lytton.

"So it was me he was interested in," Dave commented, frowning. "Can't say I'm flattered."

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"He must think you're a possible witness," I said. "He wouldn't have risked tipping off a suspect by an approach like that. I suppose it's a case of mistaken identity."

Dave continued to frown. "Sounds like a queer way for a copper to approach anybody. Local branch usually so easy to shake off?"

"I doubt it," I said. "I rather thought he had other things to do and meant to get back to me later."

Dave, who was standing by the window, suddenly stepped back.

"Right," he said. "Here he is."

The living room window overlooks the car park behind the flats.

"He was probably trying to worry you into sending for me," Dave said.

I said, "Do you want to use your Translocator?"

"Do you want me to? Just as soon find out what's up, myself."

I felt rather relieved. "They'll check you out, you know," I said. "Will your cover identity stand up?"

"Sure. It's genuine. Other people use it sometimes, but so what?"

"And I suppose you can produce an alibi—?"

"Several."

Silly question to ask a time traveler, I suppose.

"Chief Inspector Lytton," I said., "My cousin, Dave Clarke."

"Maggie says you think I've got information about the murder of that poor kid," said Dave. "If so, you're welcome to it, but I don't know what it could be."

"That was not quite what I said," replied Lytton softly. "I said that you were in a position to help the investigation. I don't think you have information at present, but you are in a position to obtain it."

"I am? How?"

"Through the Viewer." His voice carried just the faintest suggestion that Dave might have seen that for himself.

I waited a moment to see how Dave would react, but *he* was apparently waiting for Lytton to say something else.

"What viewer?" I said, to help things along.

"The Viewer, Miss Marsh, is a piece of equipment which enables a user in Elsewhere to look at events in this Universe." Lytton glanced at each of us in turn. "I'd better explain how I came to know about it. Shall we sit down?

"I was recruited for Elsewhere," Lytton said quietly, "just after I turned eighteen. I was a fairly typical recruit, I imagine, for the time and place; my father deserted my mother before I was born, she was killed in a car smash a few years later and my grandmother brought me up. Then she died. . . . I took A levels a couple of weeks later and made a mess of them. That meant another year at school if I wanted to qualify for almost anything. I didn't think I could face it."

He turned to look at Dave. "Do you know a Recruiter called Roderick Hansen?"

Dave shook his head.

"He had a house here . . . He told me later that he had houses or flats in a couple of dozen places. All I knew then was that he turned up sometimes at my school, on parents' days and so on. He knew the headmaster and most

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of the senior teachers and he'd helped several times to get kids with a good academic record into suitable jobs. Some of them were still around and doing well; others were supposed to have gone overseas.

"I met him in the market a couple of days after I got the exam results."

Lytton paused; I got the impression he was running over that meeting in his mind; excising details as irrelevant or too personal; after a moment he shrugged.

"I imagine it was a fairly ordinary exercise in recruiting. . . . It took him ten days to decide, or maybe he just didn't want to hurry things. Then he told me about Elsewhere.

"He was careful not to put pressure on me; he'd already offered to help with my immediate problems, get me a place in a hostel when I was turned out of Gran's Council flat, help me get suitable training when I'd decided what I wanted to do. He made it quite clear that if I didn't want to leave this Universe—" He stopped suddenly for a moment and I thought the words must have sounded as strangely in his mind as they did in mine— "all that still stood. I told him there was nothing to keep me here, I'd no blood ties, no close friends, no prospects, no specific ambitions. In short, I accepted. He told me to think it over for another week and if I still felt like that to meet him outside the old Plaza Cinema, at 2 P.M. on the next Wednesday, ready to go."

Lytton came to a stop.

Presently, Dave said, "Why did you change your mind?"

The chief inspector studied the area of carpet beyond his shoes. Something—irony, embarrassment, regret? tugged briefly at the corners of his mouth. Then he raised his eyes with something like defiance.

"I had a win on the Pools," he said.

I may have gasped. He looked across at me, his face expressionless.

"It was just over thirty-seven thousand pounds," he said. "Not a record, but twenty years ago it was enough to buy a house, and a car, and a decent suit, and still invest half of it. . . . That might not have made any difference, except for one thing. Hansen didn't know about it—I hadn't told anybody. I was in love."

Dave nodded, very slightly, as though this confirmed something.

Lytton was silent for several moments, obviously reviewing events and deciding they were none of our business. . . . "The win meant I could go courting with some hope of success," he said finally. "I didn't keep the appointment with Hansen—in fact I forgot all about it until a week later. I should have apologized, but I didn't know how. . . ."

He looked suddenly at Dave. "Sorry. That's a digression . . . About a month after the win I was waiting for Marilyn near the old Plaza—she worked in a knitwear shop down that street. A couple of men came out. One of them was you. I was too far away to hear what was said, but I'm a lip-reader—I learned it from Gran. You had your back to me, but the other man was saying something about a Translocator. I'd heard that word from Hansen. I saw him say *Elsewhere*, too . . . Then you turned round and walked towards me, so I got a good look at your face. You haven't changed

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much—certainly not twenty years' worth."

"And on the strength of that," said Dave presently, in a tone of mild wonder, "you were prepared to approach two perfect strangers with a preposterous story like the one you just told us?"

"You didn't pretend not to understand me, Mr. Clarke. Yes, it would seem preposterous to an outsider—to my superiors, for instance. Not material for blackmail. I can't force you to help. I can only . . . ask. Hansen gave me some idea of the attitude people in Elsewhere have to events here. Unless you're directly concerned, they're none of your business. But a child killer is everybody's enemy, Mr. Clarke. We're fairly certain that Jenny Burns was the latest of four. There'll be others, until we catch him."

Dave thrust his hands through his hair.

"Damn it, you don't know what you're asking! I can't operate a Viewer—and even if I could—"

"He had a car, Mr. Clarke." Lytton drew an envelope from his pocket. "As it happens, we know to within ten minutes when Jenny Burns was taken from her parents' garden. The registration number: that's all we need to know. Once we know his name, we can get evidence. Not everything about the killing was printed in the papers. He collected—souvenirs. The use of the Viewer, for ten minutes, on one small stretch of street. . . . We know more or less when she was thrown into the ditch, too; but that's less important."

He held out the envelope. When Dave made no move to take it, he put it down on the coffee table and stood up.

"Thank you for your time. I shall hope to hear from you."

I showed him out.

When I got back Dave was swearing, softly, but with great intensity. I waited till he seemed to have exhausted his vocabulary, then gave him a drink. He downed it without speaking.

I said, "*Is* that Elsewhere's attitude to events on Earth?"

Dave moved restlessly. "Oh—more or less . . . We *can't* set out to right all the wrongs that come to our notice, we'd never do anything else."

"Are you forbidden to?" I asked.

"No . . . the one thing *forbidden* is to try and change something that's *known* to have happened. Almost certainly it's impossible, anyway, but if by any chance anyone did succeed, the consequences are literally incalculable—but one of the possibilities seems to be that Elsewhere would lose its contact with this Universe. However, since 99.9 percent of all events go completely unrecorded, we don't *know* very many of the things that are going to happen, so we're fairly free to do most of the things that may occur to us. If we want to give somebody in this Universe a helping hand—well, it's like anything else we might want to do; it's up to us."

"So you *could* use the Viewer to read that car number plate?"

"*I* couldn't," said Dave crossly. "I used the Viewer exactly once, during training. As soon as I laid a hand on the joy-stick the picture shot up into the skies, and when I'd maneuvered it down again I was looking at a muddy field tilted at about fifty degrees in one direction and ninety in another. The in-

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structor got it back level for me, but I never did find out where the house I was supposed to look at had got to. . . . They made us do that so we wouldn't keep bothering the Viewing technicians for trivial reasons.

"If I took this up I'd have to persuade a technician to do the work for me. A couple of years ago that would have been no problem; I had several friends in that section. Now there are exactly three Viewing technicians in Elsewhere, and I hardly know any of them."

"Is that how it works?" I said. "A favor for a friend? No system of booking services—"

"For something that's not part of one's assigned responsibilities—yes, it is, mostly. If you want somebody to do something that's not part of *his* assigned responsibilities, you try to persuade him. It's easier with friends, that's all."

"But there'd be no official row about misusing equipment or the expert's time?"

"Hell, no. There's no such thing in Elsewhere. People do what they think best. Even if you decided not to carry out an assigned responsibility—I suppose it's happened—it would just be assigned to someone else."

"Who does the assigning?" I asked.

"Computers."

"So there's no way . . . "

"Yes, there is. *Hell*. I could get in a requisition, prophased—"

That word had been explained to me.

"You mean, sent to an earlier time, in Elsewhere, when there were plenty of Viewing technicians around?"

"That's right. A requisition from someone in the field is *always* honored . . . oh, damnit all."

"You mean, you'll have to ask Peter Hardingson," I said.

Peter Hardingson was the local Head of Elsewhere's Purchasing Department, which among other things owned Thingummy Hall. He had been furious when Dave took it over, even though it was not being used for anything at the time (on the quite reasonable grounds that parking Elsewhere's waifs and strays there might lead to the sort of publicity that could upset his department's local cover and waste a great deal of work.)

Dave uttered an assenting groan.

"Doesn't any other organization have facilities in this place-time?" I asked.

"Not really. They use the Purchasing Department's."

I thought.

"I got the impression that you'd—er—requisitioned the services of Hardingson's subordinates, from Elsewhere."

"I did, but that was routine. This wouldn't be. Anyway, that was one of the things that got him angry, and I may need his help with something else."

I thought again.

"Is there anyone else you could get to approach Hardingson? A . . . fieldworker in *this* place-time?"

"I don't know any of them. I suppose I could go back to Elsewhere and find out—"

"How about the man Lytton mentioned—Hansen was it?"

"The Recruiter!" Abruptly Dave sat bolt upright. "My God, that's it!" He shot to his feet and out of the room. Following, I was just in time to see him step into the cupboard in the spareroom.

I waited. Once, a Gate to Elsewhere

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had been used in my presence, and the user had returned a fraction of a second before he had completely disappeared. It was five minutes before I realized that Dave was not going to do the same. I opened the cupboard, cautiously, but apart from the coat, the mackintosh and the two suitcases, there was nothing to see.

Just as it was getting light the next morning I was woken by an unholy racket which, when I had struggled up to something resembling consciousness, I identified as the buzzer from the front door. I seized a dressing gown and stumbled out to the hallway as it sounded for the third or fourth time.

I took up the handset and croaked "What?"

Dave's voice, indecently cheerful, said, "It's me."

"All right," I said, when he was parked on the kitchen stool and the kettle had been switched on, "what have you done?"

Possibly, I sounded less than enthusiastic—I hate being woken early. Dave looked hurt.

"I went to see Hansen—he's based in London now. Great chap. Got the sense of the problem in five minutes flat, put in a requisition, all the data arrived two minutes after that."

I stared. "Then why the *hell* were you battering on my door at—" I glanced at the clock—"4:27 in the morning?"

"I missed the last train. Hansen wanted to hear about the evacuation—on his lifeline it's several hundred years off. Then we started comparing planets. He's thinking of retiring to Theta—"

"How can he?" I said. "You've just told me the evacuation is—"

"He doesn't have to wait for the evacuation. People started moving to the planets as soon as terraforming was finished, four hundred years back. The Gates are set to deliver everybody within the same five years, so that everyone shares the work of setting things up and there can't be any nonsense about First Settlers. . . . Look, I didn't catch a train at 3:15 this morning to talk about that." He drew an envelope from his pocket. "Here it is."

The envelope was not sealed. I drew out a piece of paper. It contained two strings of digits, each followed by a car registration number. The registration numbers were the same.

"That's . . . " My voice died.

"That car stood outside the kid's house for a minute and a half. Then it was parked near the spot where her body was discovered, for at least an hour." Dave's voice was heavy. "That's it, all right."

I got my voice under control with an effort.

"You can't send this as it stands. I suppose those numbers are Viewer co-ordinates?"

"Right." Dave rubbed his nose thoughtfully. "Better say that the car with that number was seen in that street at that time. It's not very credible that it would have been seen at the other time . . . Is there anything identifiable about your stationery?"

He put the carefully printed note into an envelope and stopped to consider.

"I won't address it to Lytton. Whether

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he was justified or not, I don't want to encourage him to do it again. Where does your chief constable hang out?"

I thought briefly.

"Write 'Deliver to the chief constable immediately—Urgent' and I'll stick it through the door of a policeman I know."

Dave wrote as I had directed.

I had thought that my early morning moroseness had failed to register, but I was evidently wrong. Handing over the enelope, he said earnestly, "Maggie, I don't know what I'd have done without you . . . but I can't impose on you any more. Just show me where this copper lives and I swear that whatever happens I'll never bother you again."

P.C. Collins must have obeyed the instruction to the letter. News of the arrest was on television that evening. Papers on the following day carried pictures of a beastly little hoard found in the man's house—clothes, a battered teddy-bear; four bunches of childrens' hair . . . The arrest was believed to be due to an anonymous tip-off, but full credit was given to the speed and efficiency with which Chief Inspector Lytton had followed it up.

I suspected that he would rather they had ignored him. One of the noisier tabloids had a full-page spread on the career of "Lucky Lytton," a name which I am sure his subordinates did *not* use, affectionately or otherwise. It went into detail about his parentage, his early difficulties and the football pool win which had made it possible for him to marry his "childhood sweetheart" at the age of eighteen; his joining the police force when he was twenty, and some early successes. Then, under the subhead "Not So Lucky After All?" there was a nasty little paragraph about his wife's departure, after four years of marriage, with another man.

Dave, when I saw him next, made no comment except to say that it never hurt if a copper owed you a favor.

He had departed, after a hearty breakfast in which I felt no urge to join him, promising again to leave me in peace for the foreseeable future, and he had kept his word. For almost a whole week I was left free to devote my entire energy to affairs in *this* Universe, and no doubt the County Council benefitted accordingly. Then, returning from some shopping on Saturday morning, I found him sitting on the doorstep.

We swapped enquiries about our respective concerns and learned that they were all fine. Dave fidgeted a little and then came suddenly to the point.

"Look—I'm worried about Schocker. He's behaving oddly, even for him, and he won't explain. Wish you'd have a word with him and see what you think."

Schocker, so far, had been the one member of the refugee group to adapt to their sudden exile with some degree of success.

I tried for an appropriately martyred expression, but I doubt if I had much success. Having been excluded for so long, I was delighted to be involved again in the worrying, difficult, and —let's face it—profoundly fascinating affairs of Thingummy Hall. ■

THIS IS PART OF THE SAME SERIES AS THE STORY, "THINGUMMY HALL," WHICH APPEARED IN THE JUNE 1988 ISSUE.

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analog

CONGRATULATES THE WINNERS OF THE 1987 HUGO AWARDS

Best Novel
The Uplift War
by David Brin

Best Novella
"Eye for Eye"
by Orson Scott Card
(*IAsfm*, March 1987)

Best Novelette
"Buffalo Gals Won't You Come Out Tonight"
by Ursula K. LeGuin

Best Short Story
"Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers"
by Lawrence Watt-Evans
(*IAsfm*, July 1987)

Best Professional Editor
Gardner Dozois
(*IAsfm*)

Best Non-Fiction Book
Michael Whelan's Worlds of Wonder
by Michael Whelan

Other Forms
Watchmen
by Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons

Best Dramatic Presentation
The Princess Bride

Best Professional Artist
Michael Whelan

Best Fan Artist
Brad Foster

Best Semi-Prozine
Locus
edited by Charles N. Brown

Best Fanzine
Texas SF Inquirer
edited by Pat Mueller

Best Fan Writer
Mike Glyer

John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer
Judith Moffett

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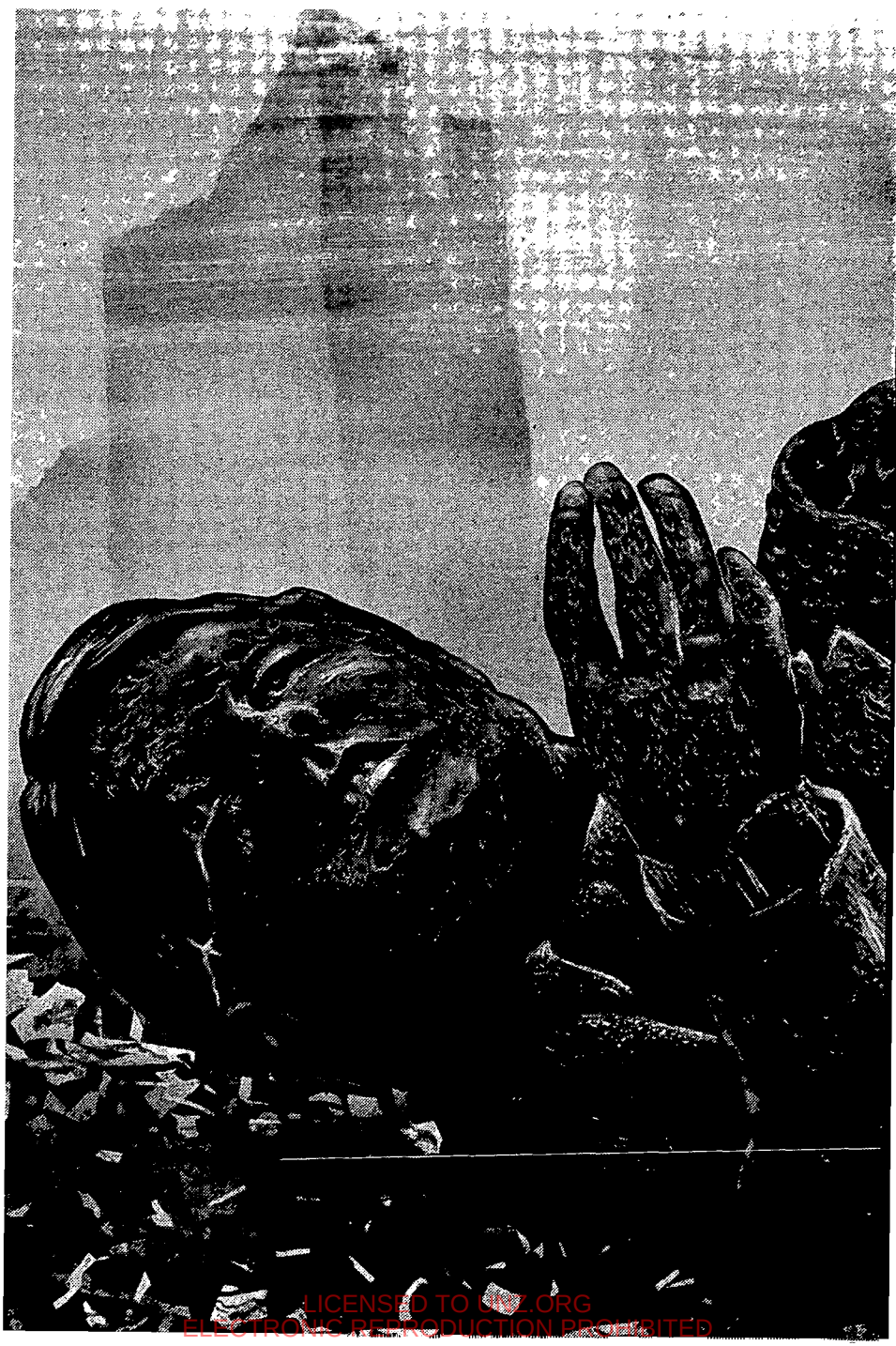

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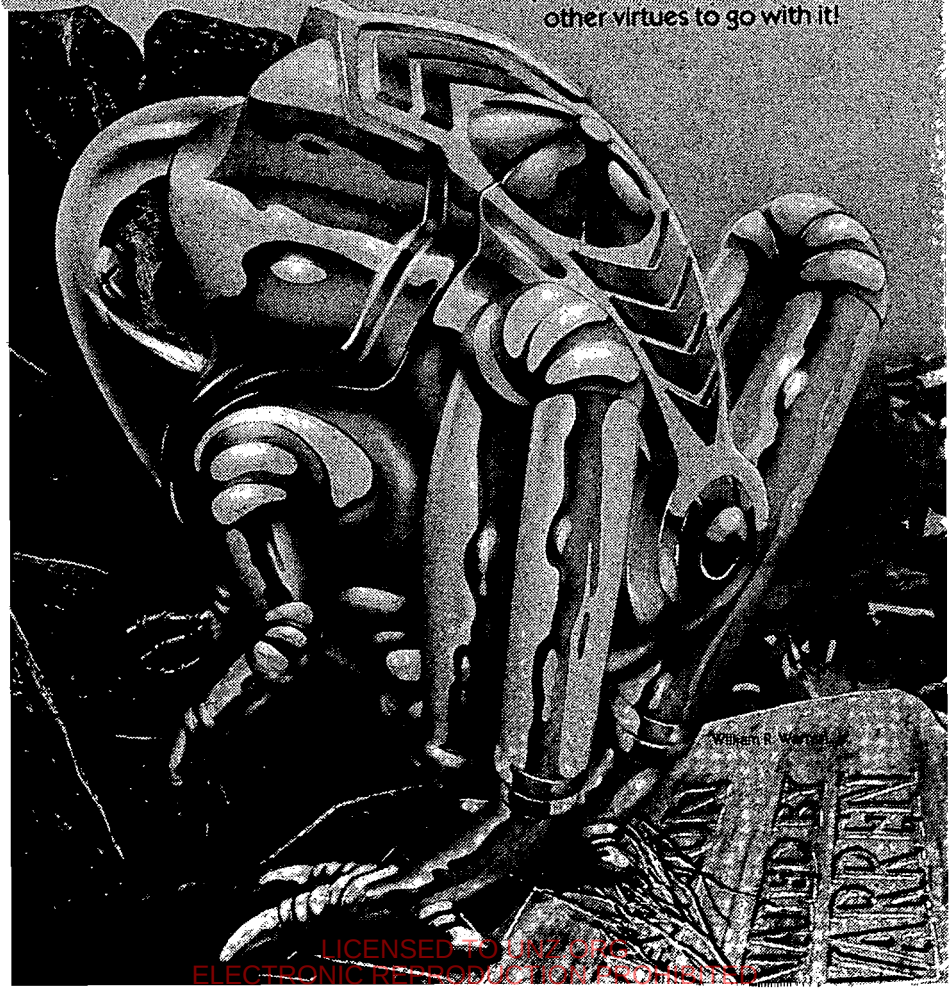
THE VEGETARIANS

Joseph H. Delaney

Versatility is a powerful virtue—provided you have the right other virtues to go with it!



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"You found no life at all?" Captain Asanina was not a scientist, she was one of the few Sobacons who wasn't, most of the other crewmen at least having had the benefit of tutoring prior to the expedition's departure.

Academician Czantaña was weary of it all. He had just spent four local days buttoned up in a shuttle, or in a protective suit, bounding around on the surface of the devastated planet below. He regarded the captain's remarks as inane.

"No," he corrected her, "I did not say that. There is life, but it's microbal, and the wrong kind—it's anerobic. The planet's athmosphere is changing—has changed drastically in the time we were in transit. Once it was oxidizing. We could have breathed it comfortably. With the plants gone and no more being liberated the crust is gobbling it up. The concentration is down to about 6 percent of what it was when humans lived here."

The captain grunted. She did not really understand what this was all about, and didn't much care either. Secretly, she was glad the natives were extinct. They had been ugly, gangly, disjointed, knobby creatures who reminded her of the lower life-forms on her own home planet. She regarded her own life-form as the most beautiful in all creation, of course, from its sleek down-covered, teardrop-shaped body and muscular jumping legs, to the delicate proboscis that dangled from below the two divided-lensed, vertical-lidded eyes to just below the broad, rubbery lipped mouth. "Then," she remarked, after that moment's pause, "there is no point in staying here. I will make ready to sail. . . . "

"NO! No, we must not leave. My colleagues would assassinate me—and you, and all the rest—if we returned with news of this enigma but no solution. I insist, we stay—have you forgotten that I am in charge of the overall mission?"

She glared at him. She had forgotten, that was clear. Captain Asanina was a proud, arrogant creature who now glared at the smaller male with a mounting contempt.

An uncontrollable shiver coursed through Czantaña's body. He, too, had forgotten something—home was sixty light-years distant, and much could happen to someone who gained the captain's enmity. He resolved to make peace, while he still could. "Besides," he added, "there is glory enough for all. Never before in all our history has such a thing been found. It may well be that locked inside the ruins of the native buildings there are riches beyond our wildest dreams. Would you run away and leave all that?"

It worked, Czantaña whispered gratefully to himself as soon as he was out of the captain's hearing. Greed was wonderful. He pushed off the dividing bulkhead and with a powerful kick launched himself down the long, straight tube that led to the science section. He arrived to find Academicians Tuza and Zambo huddled over the flat-screened console examining the samples they had brought up from the planetary surface.

Tuza, the senior of them, flicked shut his frontal eyelids and uncovered the side-looking half of his lenses. He waved his proboscis in greeting.

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"They must be fascinating," Czantaña quipped.

"They are. Here, take a look." He waddled aside to make room for Czantaña, while the other wandered off somewhere on an errand of his own.

"Like the dawn," Czantaña muttered as he viewed speciman after specimen. "All the primitive forms we're used to seeing on other much younger worlds, blossoming again, starting the planetary evolution all over again. They survive, and they wait. This will be a different world soon."

"Um. Yes, but that observation does nothing to ameliorate our ignorance. That scares me. What happened here could happen to our world. For all we know, it might have been some kind of biological effect—something we could carry back with us. . . . "

"That had not occurred to me, Academician. However, it is a point well made, and one which I wish I had thought of. I had a disagreement with the captain a few moments ago. She wanted to return. For the moment she has been persuaded that is not a good idea, but she is fickle by nature . . . "

"You saw the same things I did, Academician Czantaña—ruined cities, literally trillions of bones scattered over a landscape so battered, barren and eroded that plants could not live there even if there were any. And, it happened suddenly. Two-thirds of the way from Zahurda to here we were still recording electromagnetic signals these extinct natives generated. They were alive then."

"Maybe that is the answer. We must go back down. We must visit the ruined cities and rummage through the native records. If they had any forewarning of this catastrophe there will surely be some mention of it somewhere."

"It will be a long and difficult task. We will have to analyze the major languages and develop computer programs to translate them."

"Much of that has already been acomplished, Chief Academician. The need was anticipated. We knew the system had sapients."

"Yes, yes, we did. But there is a difference between making conversation, where the other party can help you, and in interpreting the words of the dead, who cannot. Much of the time we will be guessing."

"There is another problem, Academician."

"What is it?"

"Conditions on the planetary surface are deteriorating rapidly. Tests of the samples we brought up indicate that what has occurred already took only twenty or so local years."

"That is rapid."

"Yes, but the worst part is that it is occurring exponentially. We have learned this from a computer model. In another local year or so the weather will become extremely violent. Incessant rains will fall—rains laced with powerful acids precipitated out of the upper layers. Meanwhile, it will become increasingly transparent to the ultra-violet. I don't have to tell you what that will mean." He paused. "We can protect ourselves, of course, not that it will be easy—but the ruins can't. In another twenty local years there won't be any left, and long before that has happened any unprotected machinery the natives left will be junk."

"So, we get it now, or not at all?"

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"That's my opinion, Academician."

Academicians Tuza and Czantaña were a team this time. Czantaña was grateful for the company of a scientist again after several tours to the planetary surface with an insufferably dense female crewman who talked of nothing but the males with whom she had mated, or aspired to mate with, and at the same time indicated to Czantaña that he was unworthy.

For this trip they had sacrificed the comparative comforts one of the ship's four shuttles would have provided, and traveled instead in a flitter. The necessity of wearing athmospheric suits in it was compensated for by the simplicity of its controls and its maneuverability. They could put it down practically anywhere.

"This place was called 'Europe' by the natives," the computer droned. "It was densely populated and had been inhabited by the natives for millenia. Within the last century or two the culture differences between the inhabitants became less distinct and a common planetary speech evolved from a local language known as English. England lies to the west of our present position. . . . "

Tuza turned the volume down so he could hear what Czantaña was trying to say, not an easy task from inside the suits, though the oxygen deficient air conducted sound as well as any. "What did you say, Academician?"

"I said, 'there's another.' "

"Another what?"

"Smashed statue. That one looks like it may also have been disfigured with paint."

Tuza glance down at the ground. "I see. Must have been remarkable paint, to stand up this long when even now the acids are eating away the bronze beneath it."

"Let's take a closer look."

The flitter descended, into a comparatively open square surrounded by somber stone-faced buildings whose facades appeared to be dripping—as though they had melted. Within the sheltered foyers of some, the bleached and crumbling bones of humans could be seen.

Czantaña and Tuza emerged rapidly, keeping the hatch open for as little time as possible, so a minimum of the corrosive air would get inside and grind away at the flitter's circuitry.

The statue had been huge, easily ten times the size of a live human. It had indeed been painted with English words, undoubtedly obscene words, though none were now readable. It's head had been smashed, and it appeared to have been broken off from its base by someone who smashed its feet with a hammer.

Czantaña went to the base and cautiously climbed up several of the deteriorating stone steps in order to look at the placard. It was, as he had suspected, the same individual human. All across the continent the natives called North America, all over the parts of Europe they had thus far explored, the story was the same. Wherever they went they found statues of this human, Norman S. Grillowitz, and always they found them smashed.

Czantaña pointed his visual recorder at the base and shot a picture, then panned to the smashed head. He descended the steps and shouted at Tuza,

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who had wandered off. "I've seen enough. Let's go."

"Half a local year we've been here already," the chief academician moaned, "and still no clue. Asanina's getting ugly about it. She wants to leave and threatens to sail away while we are down on the surface."

"They'd execute her the instant she got home," Academician Zambo squealed, in his strangely high pitched voice.

"Of course they would. But, how does that help us? Worse, how does it protect Zahurda from contamination in case the epidemic theory turns out to be correct?"

Tuza had been relatively silent during this conference, very reflective. Now he spoke. "I now think that's unlikely. It's my opinion that there was much more than that involved in this extinction. I'd stake my reputation on that."

The others gazed at him as though they expected he would now expound. He was, after all, the expedition's xenobiologist, and he had been selected, as had they all, for his capability in that discipline.

He did expound. "We know that at the molecular level these creatures utilized the same aminos our own bodies do—not just some of them, but all of them. This is consistent with the biological evidence from the other three life-bearing systems our race has encountered. The panspermia theory of bio-origin seems to stand as proved. That being the case, we should all be dead by now. We haven't been that careful."

Academician Czantaña covered his own face with a grim expression. "Asanina must never hear of that remark." He paused a long moment and the expression became graver. "If it wasn't that, what was it?"

Sobacon heads are immobile. Sobacons lack necks, a product of their peculiar evolution, and of the skeletal needs of beings that travel by long, bone-shattering bounds. But they have their equivalent gesture, to rapidly and alternatively flick shut their vertical eyelids. Much time was consumed in this. It was a while before anybody spoke.

It was Czantaña again. "We've ruled out war. Such destruction as we've uncovered has been entirely natural. Nothing on a planet-wide scale appears to be the result of native conflict, and this is what it would have taken. We know from examining their records they had a planetary government, so who could have been fighting who would not have been easily overwhelmed by the masses who supported it? And we know there were masses—the population appears to have been almost five hundred thousand million individuals by the natives' own records. . . ."

"Impossible, Zambo injected. You must have misinterpreted their figures. The land surface of this world, indeed, all its surface, would not have been sufficient to provide food for such numbers."

"Perhaps I have misinterpreted," Czantaña admitted to the planetologist. "I will double check. But, undeniably there were a great many—and, arguing among ourselves gets us nowhere and solves no problems. We must become more selective in our investigation and

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follow the leads that appear most promising.

"Tuza says it was not a plague," he continued, glancing at the xena-biologist. "That sounds reasonable to me, particularly since some would always be immune and would have survived at least long enough to make records. Even more far-fetched would be the assumption that one organism wiped out all the plant life on the land and in the oceans. That simply couldn't have happened, particularly in the interval we're dealing with. So—if we rule this out—if we rule out war, and I think we have to, what else is left?"

"Racial suicide?" Zambo replied facetiously.

"We cannot rule even that possibility out just yet," Czantaña replied even more soberly. I cannot explain why I feel this way, but in a sense I do lean toward that explanation, though I realize you jest. I think we must take a massive and concentrated look into the native records. I think it is there we will find the clues that lead to the solution. I refuse to believe that the approach of a catastrophe of this magnitude could have gone unnoticed by native chroniclers and I suggest we break this conference up now so we can get to work on this. We can meet again in a few days and discuss what we have found."

"I got some techs to help me and put most of the ship's computing power into the translation," Tuza reported. "We went through several centuries of native records. There have been many violent wars fought here. There have been many devastating plagues. But there have been none of either in the last half-century, which appears to be confirmation of both your theory and mine, Chief Academician." He paused.

"Also, Chief Academician, considering your remarks about population, we gave those records special attention. It appears that you were again correct, and that our colleague, Zambo, was wrong. However, we cannot fault him for that. His reasoning was flawless. It coincided with that of most native experts. The native experts appear to have been aware of the perils of over population for almost a millenia, and to have grieved about it.

"Time after time they predicted catastrophe. Time after time technological advances proved them wrong—uh, but I digress." He paused.

Czantaña gazed at him suspiciously. There was something about Tuza's manner that disturbed him—something that suggested that Tuza had developed a pet theory of his own, one that he would no doubt present later, after laying a suitable foundation, and then advance relentlessly. Czantaña was always afraid of theories like that. Their advocates had a tendency to consider them irrefutable. Unfortunately, there was no way he could realistically counter until he knew what the other was getting at. "Very well," he sighed, "so, you digress . . . "

"Remember all those statues?"

Czantaña was taken completely by surprise by the question. All he could do was utter a stretched-out and suspicious "yesssss."

"It appears that Grillowitz had both detractors and admirers, Chief Academician. Some hated him—some loved him, though toward the end the former

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prevailed. We found statues of him in Africa and Asia which were actually enshrined. A few were in mint condition. Grillowitz appears to be responsible for the extinction of his race and the ruination of his planet." Tuza ended with a smug look on his face. His expression was saying as loudly as any words could have, "I have the answer—there is no longer any question about it."

Czantaña was trapped. There was nothing else he could do but take the cue and follow the script. "That is an extraordinarily crazy statement—perhaps crazy enough to be correct. What proof have you?"

"It all comes from native records, Chief Academician," Tuza replied, obviously striving for humility and straining to be reverent of his nominal superior. He paused too long.

Czantaña lost his own control and exploded, "Well, get on with it . . . "

"Yes, Chief Academician. Uh, well, to begin with, as I said, the statues—we found them best preserved in places which had never been very advanced or very productive. These were places where Grillowitz was obviously held in high esteem almost until the very end.

"In contrast, as you yourself noted, he fared poorly in the older, more highly developed sections of the planet, which had always been the planetary leaders. At a time in their history when they still had nations these same cultures developed a rudimentary spatial capability, but they never went beyond the beginning, and later they abandoned the endeavor altogether in order to concentrate on social problems.

"The greatest of these was overpopulation. They had a great plague that started in Africa, and depopulated great areas of the planet before a cure was found. Those who remained bred prolifically. They soon made up the loss, with a vengeance. That set the native mind, it seemed, and brought the pressure back. Soon they faced the same crisis." He paused, scowled, and made it obvious that he was about to reveal something profound.

"Then came Grillowitz."

Again, Tuza paused, for a maddening interval, milking the situation for all the drama it could sustain. And just when the others were about to burst with the agony of suspense, he cannily continued. "He was not a politician as we thought, nor a soldier—he was a scientist, like us—a biologist, like me.

"The humans called his speciality 'molecular biology.' In certain respects their techniques were more advanced than ours. They had delved as deeply into the genetic control mechanisms as we have. They had tinkered."

He gave the Sobacon equivalent of a smile as he said this. "There were," he remarked, "certain obvious differences between them and us, beyond the dissimilarities of shape. For instance, the males were larger than the females—not by much, not nearly as much as our females are larger than us, but enough so that unlike our race the females often had little alternative, given the male desire, to reproduction. Such a catastrophe could never befall us, therefore—"

"You are dawdling, Tuza." Zambo took a chance, being most junior of all the academicians, but he was overcome by curiosity.

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But Tuza was so enthralled by his presentation that he seemed not to take offense. "So I am," he said humbly. "My apologies. But, as I said, population grew unchecked by any forces but disease and war. When these went, as native records reveal they did, voluntary restraint was not enough. Their entire civilization became devoted to finding sustenance for their numbers, before famine could once again become a limiting force. They devoted their entire energies and resources to this, and as they did their civilization crumbled for lack of capital to make innovations.

"And then came Grillowitz."

"You said that once before," cried the irritated Zamba.

"Yes, you did," the chief academician agreed. "What was it he did to create this calamity?"

"He altered a microorganism."

"Ah!" Czantaña gasped it out as though it was a revelation. "Then we are back at the disease theory you assured us was impossible?"

"No, nothing of the sort. You see—and I appreciate the fact that biology is not your speciality—different organisms eat different things. The humans were omnivores—good efficient ones, at that. They could eat almost all the planet's animal life, and did. They cultivated some very efficient plants too. Still, out of the great biomass their world supported, only a fraction was directly edible by humans. This was what Grillowitz changed. Uh, he was, by the way, considered a kindly, humble, unprepossessing exponent of his race—this is important."

"Indeed. Please," Czantaña pleaded, "enlighten us."

"Certainly. Well, you see, Grillowitz realized the same thing I just told you—different organisms eat different things. Humans could not digest cellulose—cellulose being the stiffening skeleton of this world's plants, and unfortunately cellulose made up the bulk of the biomass.

"But—there were organisms which could do it. Grillowitz used material from one of these to alter another strain of microorganism which was harmlessly parasitic on his species. This organism infected all his kind, and had throughout his race's entire existence.

"When he was finished not only could the organism digest cellulose, but its own population was held in check because it lived in the human intestine. As soon as the microbe broke the cellulose down, the now-digestible nutrients were absorbed by its host's system, so it was also limited in its numbers by a sort of famine." He paused, as though to allow time for the significance of this to dawn on his colleagues.

When it didn't, when they continued to gaze blankly at him through their forward lenses, he felt a mild irritation. "Well, don't any of you see it?"

Again, silence. No one was willing to hazard a guess.

"They ate it!" he screamed.

Silence. More blank gazes.

Tuza was motivated to vindicate his theory in the face of this incredulous ignorance. "Isn't it obvious? They had no restraint. They bred and bred. The more they bred the more their offspring ate. Since they could literally eat anything their symbiotes could break down, they did just that. Native records I reviewed said that hordes of them cropped

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grass down to the roots—grass being the principal land plant form—they devoured entire forests, and behind their advance the land lay open to the elements. Now do you see?"

Again, his pause was filled only by silence and wooden figures.

It maddened him, that something so obvious, however preposterous, should be ignored. Recalling Czantaña's words he found them hollow—his theory was certainly crazy enough to be correct. He tried once more, fortified by what he thought might be the reason for their reluctance to go that final distance.

"I-I know what you're thinking," he said. "You think the process would have been self-limiting. Well, that's not true, it wasn't. Some of the natives figured it out while there was still time to remedy things but nobody listened to them either. In their frustration, since Grillowitz was long since dead, they eventually took their ire out on his statues, which were everywhere. Perhaps even as they gasped for breath in the oxygen-depleted air they continued to smash them, who knows? In any event, the humans ate every last bite of every edible substance, including, in the end, each other. But the damage was done—it was irreversible, and even though little pockets of natives might have survived a short while after the masses died and progressive drop in oxygen levels finished them off at least another generation before we arrived." He paused.

"There," Tuza continued, allowing his exasperation to show—"there, you have it—a theory to fit the facts—is it crazy enough for you, Chief Academician?"

"Yes," Czantaña replied. "I move we now adjourn, and that we tell Captain Asanina she may now sail for home. All this talk of food has reminded me of how long we've been eating out of the algae tanks. We could all use a decent meal, and the only place I know of to get one is on Zahurda."

It was not to be. Barely had the journey begun than strange changes were seen in the hydroponics system. The algae began dying, creating a panic that was abated only when after flushing and sterilizing the system and recharging it with freeze-dried stock from stores seemed to have solved the problem.

But it happened again, and again. All but essential crewmen went into sleep tanks. Those remaining went on short rations and breathed tanked air.

Academician Tuza was one of these. He worked with the algae, studied it, and at length discovered what was happening to it.

And he knew that not only would he never reach home, the ship must never be permitted to enter an area of space where Sobacons might find it. Because the ship was contaminated— contaminated with Grillowitz's organism, brought in by encystment inside some innocuous specimen of the human tragedy.

It was rampant inside the ship now, apparently hardy enough through some chance mutation provoked by the altered Earth or by the more energetic radiation here in space, to break out of its preferred and sheltered environment. It had learned to live free again after ages as a parasite. It was eating the algae. Worse, Tuza knew, there was nothing

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they, with their meager resources, could do about it.

But they could avoid the trap which had snared the humans—the trap of hope. The humans had lost their home, but Zahurda could be saved.

He discussed this with Captain Asanina, not because he liked her or valued her advice, but because he needed her technical skills. She did agree with him, however, and together, they did the necessary. What new life was now evolving on the ruined Earth took no note, of course, but for a brief instant in their troubled skies a new star briefly blazed out of tiny incandescent fragments of the Sobacon ship. But no explosion, however violent, destroys all, and a miniscule fragment was all that was needed. Bacterium are tiny creatures, and hardy, and necessarily patient. The ages were theirs, as they had been always. Even though the wait might be a long one it was sure to end—someday. ■

IN TIMES TO COME

●Our January issue features a fact article of particular importance and interest, going into much more depth on a subject I touched on in a recent editorial: hypertext (or, in recognition of just how extensive the changes it brings will be, hypermedia). The author is uniquely qualified: his novel *David's Sling* is, as far as I know, the first to be published in a hypertext version as well as the conventional book form. His article's title, "Hypermedia and the Singularity," is a direct reference to the "Singularity" that played such an important part in Vernor Vinge's novel *Marooned in Real Time*, in which the curves of human progress became so steep that they approached a vertical asymptote. Something very much like that is beginning to look like a real and not too distant possibility—and hypermedia is one of the influences most likely to bring it about.

We'll also have what I suspect will be one of Timothy Zahn's more controversial novelettes. The word "soul" has been around a very long time and has acquired powerful emotional connotations. But suppose the concept is demonstrated to have a very physical reality, that can be manipulated as a part of medical treatment. . . .

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on gaming

Matthew J. Costello

A C.E.S. is a gaudy, elephantine affair, one that most people will never experience. Though billed as the "Consumer Electronics Show," it's a show designed for the sellers of electronics hardware and software. Dealers, ranging in size from small mom-and-pop stores to massive chains with tremendous buying clout, arrive by the tens of thousands to see what's new.

And although the winter show is held in Las Vegas, and the buildings crawl with young models handing out promotional magazines, the mood is generally all-business. It's the land of buyer and seller, business the old-fashioned American away . . . even if dozens of the companies are based across the Pacific.

This year's summer C.E.S., held in Chicago as usual, was more than a bit of a disappointment. For starters, there didn't seem to be anything "new." Hot items were a pocket computer called Psion that you can carry around, and then connect to your mainframe when you're ready to dump your data. Also word processing typewriters, like the Smith Corona PWP 6, were big news . . . an attempt to bridge the gap between typewriters and full-fledged computers.

In the computer/video game area, there was a definite sense of deja-vu. A game that caused the most comments was something that had actually been released months before, *The Three Stooges* (Cinemaware.) Everywhere else, both in the booths and the demonstration suites, there was a sense of having seen it all. One more game of moving pixels shooting/attacking/eating other pixels. While the level of graphics was up, with some really stunning-looking screens, the new games themselves didn't seem all that much different.

The dominant force on the floor was Nintendo, and its hordes of licensees. Video games were back with a vengeance, with computer game companies moaning how one game *(The Legend of Zelda)* could equal the entire revenues produced by computer games. There were dozens of Nintendo-licensees booths, and all of them worried about one thing . . . would there be enough micro-chips for them to get their Nintendo Entertainment System cartridges produced? As of then, they were being severely rationed.

But even as everyone was jumping on the bandwagon, there were rumblings from across the Pacific. The sale of Nintendo Entertainment consoles and cartridges was down in Japan. And I got the feeling that some thought it could be a precursor of things to come.

Perhaps this video game boom could also end.

But there were a few bright spots . . . : which I present forthwith.

Lucasfilms Games, who produced the award-winning Maniac Mansion, displayed an even more ambitious game,

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Janna paused in the doorway, watching her husband refill his tumbler with straight vodka. She could just hear him talking to himself over the soft chamber music playing in the background, but could not quite make out what he was saying. There was little doubt in her mind as to his monologue's content. She sighed, but there was a fond smile on her face.

After one last glance back over her shoulder into the busy kitchen, she headed toward the bar set up at one side of their business dining room. Her Denji original's drifting layers of gauzy white silk gave her a fey, ghostly look, and her small slippered feet were all but soundless as she seemingly floated across the plush carpeting. Slim's barn-side broad back was to her. He remained oblivious to her approach.

So when she dropped her hand onto his slumped shoulder he yelped, jerking out of the posture she always referred to as his tightly coiled slouch. Vodka flew out of his glass and splashed onto the varnished mahogany bartop.

"Dammit, Janna," he sputtered, "How many times have I asked you —*begged* you—not to creep up on me like that? I could have a coronary! Or worse!" He tried for a threatening glare but fell short of the mark. His round, ruddy, rubbery face did not have enough mean bones under it. The sad truth was, that with the addition of the proper mustache, he could have passed for the identical twin of the late, great Oliver Hardy.

It was as his wife, and not business partner, that she ruffled his thinning black hair. "Will you just relax, Slim? Everything's under control."

Slim sniffed and gulped at the unspilled remains of his vodka. "Sure, babe. Right. D. Elbert Clairebourne—I mean *the* D. Elbert Clairebourne—is going to show up any minute now, we got people back in the kitchen cooking the Product and I can't talk to them, they don't even speak English for pity's sake. A year's worth of work and more is hanging on this showing, and if this nutso notion flies then *fine*, but . . . " He shuddered, unable to voice the colors of disaster he saw painting the evening ahead. Shades of red and black, each and every one.

Janna made soothing noises and wiped up the spilled vodka while letting him indulge in another bout of worrying. That was part of their partnership: she handled any dealings with the public and all business matters; he created and perfected the product, and did enough worrying for the both of them.

No matter what she said or did, he would stew. So she just poured herself a short brandy and sat down beside him. They made a mismatched pair. Slim was not quite large enough to qualify as a Sumo wrestler, but proper diet and training could easily fix that. She was small and lithe, with that combination of face and form usually referred to as elfin. Not only did this mean that she was still getting asked for proof of age at the tender age of thirty-three, it also made Slim's life slightly miserable. Not very fond of going out to begin with, he was so big and she so small that when they were out together people would eye him as if he were some sort of slimy, oversized child molester. That made him nervous and furtive, and consequently he always looked like he was

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up to something shady, if not outright nasty.

Janna had her own apprehensions. After all, Del Clairebourne was one of the giants of the food industry. Comparing their little company to his gargantuan empire was rather like comparing a vole to a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, and the Great Man himself was capable of reducing the most carbide-hearted Union Boss to tears with no more than a frown. Or worse yet, a smile.

The handling of the showing and the obligatory haggling over price would be entirely up to her. Once Del came, Slim would turn into a 300 pound clam. Nobody in her right mind wouldn't be slightly nervous. But she had dickered with him before and survived. She was ready—almost eager—to go toe to toe with him once more.

The real problem was that their featured product this time was slightly . . . unusual. If things went awry there could be . . . repercussions.

But Pleased To Meat You Ltd. stood pretty well clear of any fiscal banana peels. They would survive even if things went badly. She would see to it. She had brought them this far, and had no intentions of letting them slip now.

They had come out of college penury with no assets other than Slim's genius, her razor-sharp business mind, and the sort of love shared by those who find that they are two halves of the same thing. Rung by rung they had climbed to this height; owning an apartment, building at a fashionable address and being able to afford reserving half of it for their own use as living space, the large business kitchen and this sumptuous dining room, and of course Slim's ever-growing lab-space.

Janna watched Slim over the rim of her glass. Now he was mumbling something about the "Other Project," some new notion he had been musing upon for the past few months. He had not yet told her what it was, but she had learned that it was important enough to him that it, plus her prodding, had driven him to follow through with the product they were going to try to market tonight.

Against his better judgment.

"Close your eyes," she said softly. "Smell."

Slim came back to earth. He hunched his big shoulders in protest, but did as she asked. His pug nose twitched. After a moment a smile that made him look like Ollie Hardy as Lord Buddha suffused his rubbery face. His gut rumbled hopefully.

"And you know how it tastes," she prompted.

"Even better than it smells." He rubbed his double chin. "I know. I ought to, I created the damned stuff. But it's just so—" He sighed, refilling his glass. Half of it disappeared in a single gulp. The four ounces of hundred proof vodka braced him enough to let him finish his sentence. "—*risky*."

Janna had watched Slim grow progressively crazier during the week leading up to this night. But all things considered, he wasn't doing too badly. Janna smiled when she remembered their first big showing. The one when he had locked himself in the bathroom and refused to come out until after the product had been sampled, pronounced excellent and purchased. That escapade had even turned out to be a plus. It had

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helped provide a concrete foundation for his carefully constructed image as an eccentric genius. He could have supplied the raw materials for three.

At least she didn't have to worry about him getting drunk. He could swill hard liquor by the bucketful with no noticeable effect. But she would have to watch him around the champagne. Three glasses of bubbly and he would be climbing atop the table, shedding his clothes and singing "I Gotta Be Me," in a lunatic falsetto. That had been the highlight of their third showing.

"The edge of the envelope, love," she said quietly, running her slim fingers through her short, wheatstraw hair. "If we're going to get the capital needed to do the work you keep saying you want to do, we need to sell something big. To be big it has to be something really unusual. Something—"

"Risky." He sighed. "I know all that, it's just—"

A birdlike trill sounded over the soft acoustic guitar now playing in the background. Slim stiffened, looking stricken. Janna folded her hands and raised her voice.

"*Answering.*"

The comp recognized her command. "Front door, Ma'am," came the relayed message. "Mr. Clairebourne and entourage are here."

She surveyed the room one last time. Everything was perfect. The dinner table was the room's centerpiece, discreetly spotlit. The white napery, polished silver, and glittering crystal made it glow like a fairy-tale city. Slim had not been let into the kitchen since he had changed, so his baggy grey wool pants and dark turtleneck were unsmirched. They were as ready as they were ever going to be.

Poor Slim seemed to be holding his breath. She winked at him, then answered the doorman. "We would be delighted to receive him."

"Yes'm. Thank you."

"Thank you, Morris. *Out.*" A muted tone signaled disconnect. Scarcely a moment later Slim shifted uneasily, then whispered urgently, "I gotta use the head!"

"Of course you do, dear," she said mildly. "Please don't dawdle." He did this every time.

Slim heaved himself to his feet and lumbered hurriedly away.

"Be careful you don't splash water all over yourself when you wash!" she called after him. She was not the slightest bit worried that he might lock himself in.

There was no lock on the bathroom door. She had every base covered.

Depending upon how you looked at it, there were either three or four of them in the elegant combination bar/dining room where they conducted their showings.

The three certains were Slim, Janna, and D.Elbert Clairebourne. The questionable one was the Great Man's servant cum bodyguard, Timmy.

As usual, Clairebourne's entourage had consisted of several bodyguards, and he had left them scattered like breadcrumbs behind him on his way up to see Slim and Janna, bringing only one in with him.

Timmy, a pale, slight little man who habitually wore the sort of smile seen on the faces of Zen Masters and the

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cheerfully insane, had made an efficient sweep through the kitchen, bath and dining room, nodded in approval at the absense of explosives, bugging devices and hidden assassins, then took up a smiling, silent vigil by the door.

Etiquette, as practiced in Del's social strata, dictated that persons such as Timmy were to be ignored. But Slim and Janna were uneasy with that state of affairs, especially since Timmy had been there with his boss several times before. Moreover, there was a disarmingly boyish air about him which made them feel that they ought to at least offer him milk and cookies.

After a round of drinks and some polite social chatter between Janna and Del, Timmy seemed to fade into the woodwork in a way that left Slim feeling envious. He had to wonder if ease of invisibility was in direct proportion to body mass. Could it be time to try yet another diet?

"Shall we be seated?" Janna asked, sliding demurely from her leather-topped barstool and indicating the waiting table. The champagne had already been poured. It was now time to move the proceedings into their next stage. A longer wait would make Del impatient, less time would have made him feel rushed.

As for Slim, the poor man was doing a passable job of playing silent partner by keeping his head down, his mouth shut, and striving to be invisible. But Janna knew that he was close to climbing the walls. Or trying to escape straight through one. Given a choice, he would rather have spent the evening locked in a room filled with armed terrorists and IRS auditors. Most people made him nervous. Del *terrified* him.

That was no great surprise. Countless fearless corporate warriors and political power-brokers had been reduced to quivering jelly by their guest. The fact that they had dealt exclusively with him for the last few years, and this was nowhere near their first showing for him made no difference to Slim. And it had taught Janna just how wary and wily she would have to remain until the deal was finalized.

D. Elbert Clairebourne did not have to exert himself to be intimidating. To begin with, his company, Del-Licious Foods, was large enough to deserve a seat in the United Nations, and he owned it lock, stock and bologna-slicer. His net worth was somewhere up in the realm of imaginary numbers, and he could write a check for the national debt without bothering to check his balance first.

Nobody possessing that sort of wealth and power can be just a regular guy, whether he wants to or not. Del Clairebourne had no such egalitarian aspirations.

Then there was the man himself. Physically, he resembled the movie and stage actor James Earl Jones when he was in his prime. Del had that same powerful build and overwhelming presense, that same intelligent, kingly bearing and mien. Although informally dressed in an open-necked red silk shirt and loose black trousers, nobody in their right mind would have taken him as the sort you could tell a dirty joke to and nudge in the ribs.

"Thank you, my dear," he rumbled. His voice and diction were modeled

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after Jones's as well. He spoke in a baritone so deep you could feel it inside your own chest, each perfectly enunciated word carrying the weight and impact of a falling boulder. Coming from his lips, something so prosaic as "Pass the salt," sounded like a commandment from God.

"I must say that whatever you have cooked up smells absolutely splendid." As he spoke Timmy came forward, pulled out the Great Man's chair, then faded back with the smiling, silent efficiency of a cheerful Ninja butler.

"Why thank you, Del," Janna replied with artless ease. As usual, Slim winced when she called the man by his first name. Those rare moments when he grew brave or agitated enough to address him directly, instead of through Janna, he called Del *sir* or tried to avoid using any name at all.

"You are welcome." His teeth flashed white against his dark face as he smiled. It would be easy to imagine his face belonging to an ebony idol much accustomed to sacrifice. "Has the moment arrived? Are you ready to remove the veil of secrecy and reveal the nature of your latest triumph?"

Slim made a sound like a man choking on a live eel. Del turned toward him, one eyebrow raised in inquiry. "You would prefer to wait until after I've sampled it?" he rumbled.

Slim could only stare woodenly at his plate. Janna knew that Del was genuinely trying to put her husband at ease. But his somehow being able to understand Slim's strangled monosyllables only made things worse. The only way for Del to truly put Slim at ease was to leave after promising to never return.

"If you have no objection," Janna said, drawing Del's attention back to herself. She knew poor Slim was more likely to swallow his tongue than answer coherently.

Del shrugged. His smile widened. "Of course not. I might even take the unraveling of its enigmatic nature as a challenge. Besides, how could I deny you? Your products have helped keep me a very rich man."

He toyed with his glass. "By the way, your cultured Lark's-tongue is now the biggest selling neomeat in the market. Getting McDonalds to bring out the McLarkie took us over the hump."

Janna smiled as if she had not noticed the subtle barb hidden in that seemingly innocuous comment. Cultured Lark's-tongue had been one of their first sales to Del, and pulled a per-unit licensing fee that was miserly by the standards set by their later deals. He was reminding her that he was willing to let her play with him a little, but only by his rules.

Janna had her own shaft nocked. She tapped the signal button on the keypad beside her place setting, summoning the waiter to bring the appetizer.

Her dark eyes sparkled with glee as she said, "then you might like the new gourmet version of that old thing Slim's whipped up." On cue, the tuxedoed waiter came in bearing a covered silver salver.

"Gourmet version?" Del said doubtfully. "But it started out as a gourmet food before shaking down to the mass-mart."

She spread her hands. "You can call it whatever you like. It will cost a bit more to culture—say 15 to 20 percent—and you'll probably end up

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spending at least another 15 percent on packaging.''

Del frowned. ''Why higher packaging?'' The waiter put a small silver plate before him, then glided silently away. Del took one look at what was on it, and sucked his breath through his teeth. The expression on his face became one of unguarded amazement.

''You've cultured them as individual tongues! They're not just sliced and shaped out of a tissue block!''

Sure enough, his plate contained a small *soleille* of Dijon mustard spiced with tarragon, surrounded by arrowhead-shaped lark's-tongues arranged in a sunburst pattern. He picked one up with his fingers, eyed it like a forty carat diamond, then nipped at it delicately. His eyes drooped shut in concentration.

''Texture . . . extraordinary!'' A bigger bite. ''Flavor . . . ah, even better than your original formulation! Subtly smoky, not the slightest hint of gaminess . . . that haunting, tantalizing demi-sweetness . . . '' He paused, eyes still closed as the tastebuds, which were the bedrock of his fortune, assayed the morsel.

Slim watched out of the corner of one eye, wiping his sweaty hands on his already-limp napkin.

Janna was the picture of perfect equanimity. She knew Slim's reformulation of his original culture was a sure winner, and stood a good chance of helping her balance out the beating they had taken on the original.

Del's rapt smile delivered his verdict before he could say it out loud. ''Aftertaste just as true as the first.'' He made a pleased sound deep in his throat, a rumble like that of a lion with a bellyful of missionary.

''Then you approve?'' Janna asked mildly.

''*Approve?* This will be the new Crown Jewel of my Gourmet Line! This was certainly worth the trip here, and I—''

''I'n'it,'' Slim mumbled, hunching his round shoulders in misery, when he realized that he had spoken out loud. His hope that Del had not heard him was more fervent than a prayer.

No such luck. Del rounded on him, noble brow furrowing. ''What do you mean this isn't what you brought me here to try?'' His face hardened, and his deep voice took on an unmistakably menacing note. God as landlord at Eden on eviction day.

''You had better not be telling me that this is something you are planning to sell to my competition as a means of getting even for the price I gave you on the first version. *Is it?*''

Slim sank deeper into his chair under the weight of Del's massive displeasure. Fear leached the color from his face, and he looked like he wished he could withdraw into his navel like a turtle into its shell.

One of Del's hands closed into a fist. ''Answer me, damn you!'' Silver and crystal rang as he struck the table.

''*Del!*'' Janna said sharply, her face gone hard as porcelain.

His daunting gaze swung from the terrified Slim to her like the business end of a howitzer. But she did not flinch. She stared him straight in the eye, her anger seeming to crackle in the taut, silent moment when their wills locked.

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"We have always come to you first with everything we develop," she said in a low, actinic voice, "and we value you as a customer. But you do not own us, and I will give you this warning just once: I will *not* tolerate you trying to bully Slim. If you have any problems or complaints, you bring them to *me*. That is my end of the business. I will redress them if they are valid, or I will tell you to go fuck yourself. Do we understand one another?"

D. Elbert Clairebourne, whose agribiz holdings were greater than many chartered nations, stared down at the small, fierce woman who dared talk to him like that with an intensity that was terrible to behold. One story in the Clairebourne Mythos was that a few years back some grudge-crazed whacko had somehow slipped past all the security outside and into his mansion, barged into his bedrom, and put a gun to his head. According to the story, Del had simply stared at the intruder—in the same fashion as he was now staring at Janna. His midnight visitor had whimpered, turned the gun on himself, and his final thought had changed a priceless pastoral Monet into a dripping Jackson Pollack.

A mischievous smile crept out onto Janna's face. Del's brown eyes widened in surprise, then his forbidding aspect crumbled into helpless laughter.

"I am sorry," he said when he finally pulled himself together enough to speak. "I'm right in the middle of three separate corporate wars, a congressional inquiry, and an SEC investigation, and so a little cranked. Beyond that, all I can offer as an explanation for my behavior is that one tends to stop worrying about stepping on the toes of others when each time one does, the offended party gives one a sick smile and begs one's pardon. But it is I who must beg pardon."

He turned to face Slim, his dark face solemn. "You, sir, are probably the greatest neomeat designer working anywhere. You are an *artiste*, while I am but a mere merchant. I had no right to treat you with anything other than the respect you so richly deserve, and I hope that you can excuse my crass behavior. Will you please accept my most profound apologies?"

Slim blushed and ducked his head, whispering, "S'okay." The much-abused napkin in his pudgy hands was one big, damp knot.

Del nodded soberly, and aware that his apology was causing the man almost as much discomfort as his earlier attack, turned back toward Janna.

"Some of my people have advised me that I should simply take Pleased To Meat You over, instead of continuing to pay the licensing fees for the things you develop. I have, if you will please pardon my borrowing your phrase, told them to go fuck themselves. Each and every one of my dealings with you strengthens my resolve that it should remain so. You are an utter, overwhelming delight."

He put his hands on the edge of the table, his face rueful.

"I, however, have been a boor. That is inexcusable. Name your price for your gourmet Lark's-tongues. I shall pay it. There will be no quibbling. Moreover, I promise to buy your other product sight unseen. I hope this will in some small way help make amends

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for my thoughtless impugning of your ethics."

"Why thank you, Del," Janna replied sweetly. "You'll have the contract in the morning, and I promise not to gouge you too deeply. At least not for what you've already sampled. Now, are you ready for our next delight?"

Del sketched a bow. "I tremble with anticipation."

Janna gave him a wink. "Just as long as you don't shiver your wallet flat." She touched the call button. "Now the real fun begins."

Against all orders, Slim drank some of his champagne. That had been bad, but he was sure the worst was yet to come.

"Novelty," Del intoned. "It counts almost as much as quality, and it's the hardest edge to keep. Cultured meats may make for cheap protein of reliable quality and stable price, more efficient land use than livestock and feedlots, earn me tax points for using more workers, sidestep the problems caused by the Great Meat Hormone Backlash of the nineties and all that, but the only way to keep your share of the market is to be there first with something new to satisfy the public's insatiable appetite for novelty."

He spread his hands. "There is no fighting it. For instance, I can provide neomeat chicken breast for an in-store price of less than a dollar a pound, and I can produce it in hundred-ton lots. But what do the non-Dole buyers want? Cultured Moa breast. McDonalds is selling millions of McLarkies, four to one over their beef and chicken. Passenger Pigeon Pot-pies are hot, and it will be over a year before Elephant Hams come down within most people's reach."

He stared down at the cutlet on his plate. "This smells absolutely fabulous. I must admit that I've no idea what it is, even though I've rambled on about things you know at least as well as I do to give myself time to figure it out. You won't tell me?"

Janna shook her head. "Not yet. This just might be *the* neomeat of the decade. We want your unprejudiced opinion."

Del picked up his knife and fork. "Then you shall have it." He handled the heavy silver flatware as deftly as a surgeon, cutting off a small slice while carefully noting the neomeat's texture and grain as it parted under his blade.

"Very good so far," he commented. "Tender, but not the slightest bit mushy. Lovely cutting characteristics. Perfect graining."

They watched him hold up his fork, eyeing the piece of meat speared on its tines like the rarest of artifacts. "Pinker than pork, whiter than beef. Moist, but not bloody. No apparent grease." His broad nostrils flared. "Slightly sweet scent, but not cloying. Is it Zebra? Giraffe? Something on that order?"

Janna smiled inscrutably. "Cultured zoo animal? Really, Del."

"Hmmmmm. Perhaps something extinct. Unlikely to be reptilian; too tender, wrong texture." He brought the morsel to his lips, closed his eyes and began to chew.

A beatific smile spread across Del's face as his jaw worked. He looked like God was giving him a backrub.

Janna watched his reaction with guarded satisfaction. Slim couldn't bear

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to watch Del eating his brainchild, and instead used his wife's face as a mirror to see how the fruit of his labor was being received. They exchanged glances, the bond between them tight enough for them to be able to pack more than a minute's worth of communication into that short, silent exchange.

Janna saw nothing but clear sailing ahead. Del obviously loved the product, and he had already promised to buy it. As far as she was concerned only the matter of the Maximum Extractable Price remained unsettled.

Slim was not so sanguine. In point of fact, he was convinced they were doomed.

He may have created and perfected the product, but he had more reservations than a five star restaurant offering all entrees for a buck even. He ignored his wife's warning look as he drained his glass of champagne. If they were going to go down in flames, he preferred to watch the ground rushing up at him while sipping chilled Taittinger.

Del sighed, regarding the meat on his plate with awe. "That was . . . " He shook his head, cut off another slice and put it in his mouth. A semi-orgasmic moan sounded deep in his barrel chest as he chewed. A regretful look flitted across his face as he swallowed.

After a moment of respectful silence, he carefully laid down his utensils. Taking a deep breath he faced Slim, who seemed to have developed an overwhelming interest in the bottom of his wine glass. "You, sir," he said with almost religious awe, "are a genius. A *wizard!* This is . . . " He shook his head once more. "I don't have the words with which to praise your accomplishment."

Slim managed a barely perceptible nod: Del took that as acknowledgement of his compliment. He swung to face Janna, his face intent. "Name your price."

She kept her face carefully neutral to hide her exultation. Those three words meant that she had reached the top of the mountain. "Then you rather like it, Del?"

"Like it? *Like* it? Pheasant pales to overcooked crow beside it! It is ambrosia, the carnivore's nectar, the—" Del mastered himself with an effort that had Janna gleefully moving beads on the abacus at the back of her mind.

"Yes, I rather like it. I want it. I *must* have it. Please do not toy with me. Name your price."

Those words again! She could not resist baiting him just a little longer. She had waited years for this moment. "All right, but don't you want to know what it is first?"

"I don't give a sh—" He bit off his expletive, licked his lips. "All right. Is it Panda? Koala? Platypus?"

"No." A leisurely sip of Taittinger. So sweet.

"Then *what,*" he grated through clenched teeth, "the hell *is* it?"

Janna glanced at her partner, who was intent upon draining a second glass of champagne before the axe he believed poised over their necks sent their heads rolling. Then she faced Del, giving him her most winning smile as she delivered her bombshell.

"Why, it's cultured *human* meat, Del," she said.

The expression on Del's face changed

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from one of mild but growing annoyance to dawning horror, turning an ashy gray in the process. He stared at Janna as if she had just told him that she was one of the Borgias, and had just pulled the old family joke on him.

"Hu—" He was unable to force any more than the first syllable past the sudden constriction in his throat.

His gaze dropped to his plate, his eyes bulging so badly they threatened to end up garnishing the remains of his entree.

"Oh *man* . . . " There was the rest of it, and that unfortunate choice of words pushed him over the edge. He shuddered and lurched to his feet, blurting, "*Bathroom!*" in a clotted voice.

His bodyguard Timmy had already come out of his unobtrusive position by the door and had him by the elbow. The bigger man sagged against him, hand over his mouth.

"That way," Janna began, rising from her chair and pointing. But Timmy knew the way and was already hustling his boss in that direction. Moments later the door slammed shut behind them.

Janna dropped back into her chair. She refused to look at Slim. Instead, she snatched up her tulip-shaped champagne glass and sat there, her back ramrod straight, rolling the stem between her slim fingers and contemplating the bursting bubbles.

"Well, I finally went too far." She closed her eyes and knocked the drink back in a single gulp. "What a fool. You were right all along."

"And never righter than when I married you for better or for worse," Slim replied, gently resting his big hands on her shoulders. He felt her tense up, momentarily startled by his sudden presense behind her. But then she slumped, her thin shoulders drooping in resignation.

"Don't be so sure of that," she answered tonelessly. "I'm afraid that things have only started getting worse."

After what seemed like at least an hour's worth of suspenseful waiting, D. Elbert Clairebourne emerged from the bathroom, Timmy right behind him. The Great Man's color was still off, but the grim set of his face was that of a roused predator, not a victim.

Looking neither left or right, he marched straight toward the front door, not even slowing as he uttered the most dreadful parting words possible.

"*You will be hearing from my lawyers.*"

Janna had leapt to her feet when the bathroom door opened, hoping for a chance to salvage the situation. But at those words she collapsed back into her chair, covering her face with her hands. She was all too aware that Del's stable of lawyers made the Soviet Army look like a pre-school fingerpainting class. They would squash Pleased To Meat You Ltd. like a bunny under a tank tread.

"We're fucked for sure," she said to no one in particular.

"Count on it." Del intoned, sealing their fate. "I'll have your ass for this."

He and his bodyguard were almost to the door when Slim suddenly bolted from his wife's side, bounding across the room with a speed and agility that belied his size. He planted all three hundred pounds of himself in front of the door.

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"*Sorricannumleave*," he mumbled, staring at his feet.

Del halted, fury burning its way past his stony facade. "What the hell do you mean you can't let me leave?" he growled.

Slim cringed but held his ground. He cleared his throat, then whispered, "Youboigopfrit."

"I bought it and now I have to pay for it?!?" Del roared, clenching his fists. "Why you fat, miserable little—! You—!" He drew in a rattling breath. "*Timmy!* Remove this creature from my path! *Now!!*"

The slight, placid-faced little man moved to obey, stepping between Del and the object of his ire. Slim was over twice his size, but he appeared unconcerned. "I'm real sorry, Mister Slim, sir," he said gently, "but Mr. C really wants to go home now."

Slim ignored the smaller man. He shivered like a man-shaped jello mold in an earthquake, then ever so slowly lifted his head to look past Timmy and straight at Del. Back at the table Janna was rising to her feet. But he forced himself to ignore her.

"S-so you're going to, um, t-throw away b-billions of dollars," he stammered, "on a g-gut reaction?"

If you want to get a mule's undivided attention, whack him with a 2x4; with a megabuckster, bludgeon him with billions. Del's eyes narrowed to slits. "Explain yourself," he snapped.

Slim ducked his head. "Sure, if—if you'll come back and sit down so we can talk this over like, um rational people. Now Janna—" He threw her the sort of look you would see on the face of a drowning man. "She and I have, um, talked this over quite a lot, and, well—"

"We have already come up with answers to most of your objections to the product," Janna put in smoothly, recovering her composure and coming to her beleagured husband's aid. "Remember, if I had told you that you'd just eaten, say, Unicorn Steak, you would be trying to smother us in money right now." She reached Slim's side and stood beside him, taking his hand. But her eyes never left Del. "Besides, you have already promised to buy it."

"Very well," Del said stiffly. "I am a man of my word. Timmy, give the lady a dollar."

Oddly enough, his bodyguard made no move to obey. He only stood there with a dreamy look on his face. Del frowned. Before he could reiterate his order, Janna proved that she had completely recovered her fighting spirit.

"Now why should we accept that," she said sweetly, "when someone like Taze-T-Treats would give us a seven figure price and a very nice licensing fee? Then the two of you could have a nice, long, *expensive* legal war over rights while Slim and I soak up rum and rays in sunny Tahiti. Come on, Del. Be real."

Slim glanced shyly at his wife, his round face shining with love and pride. She was back in charge and all was right with the world. Janna watched Del's face as if she could see the cogs turning inside his head. Del pursed his lips, his face absolutely unreadable. The seconds dragged out to almost a minute.

Both Slim and Janna were taken off-guard when Del turned to look at his

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bodyguard. "Well, Timmy," he said, "you seem to have an opinion."

The pale man beamed happily, nodding his head.

"And what is it?"

"I think you could use a drink, Mr. C."

Del sighed. "Bourbon," he said. "Make it a triple."

Janna toyed with her brandy snifter but did not drink. All of her attention was focused on this new factor in the equation.

"So, Timmy," she said, "You're not really Del's bodyguard after all?"

Timmy glanced at his boss, who gave him a scarcely perceptible nod. He grinned. "Oh no, ma'am. Protecting Mr. C is my job, and I do it real good, too."

Del drained his glass, then helped himself to a refill. "It's true. He's saved my life at least twice. But every so often he has an opinion on business matters. He'll tell me if I ask, but he won't take anything for the advice, and he doesn't want to be anything other than my bodyguard." He took a sip of his new drink. "Tell them how much I pay you, Timmy."

Timmy's face lit up like that of a twelve year old given a new bike. "Mr. C pays me five million dollars a year. He also puts another million into my retirement account. Isn't that nice of him?" He giggled. "I really *like* working for Mr. C!"

"Timmy is rather," Del searched for the proper word, "*uncomplicated*. Most things go right over his head, although he seems almost supernaturally aware of anyone harboring ill intentions toward me. But every so often he comes up with an opinion on things, and I've learned that it pays to listen." He watched the man in question unconcernedly drinking his milk while they were talking about him.

"Timmy?" He looked up wearing a big grin and a milk moustache. "You think I should strike some sort of deal with these people, don't you?"

"Yessir, Mr. C."

"Can you tell me why?"

Timmy's unlined face screwed up in thought. "Well," he said slowly, "You really liked the stuff they made back when you thought it was some kinda mystery meat. You always said you want to have the best tasting stuff in the whole world, and you said it was really really good."

Del looked wistful. "Good? It was the best neomeat I've ever tasted!" His face hardened. "But it was *human flesh!*"

Timmy only smiled. The expression on Slim's face made him appear almost as simple as Timmy, but it was a sign that he was deep in thought.

Janna shrugged, her face mirroring her words. "So what? The initial tissues were given voluntarily—I ought to know, I donated them. Implanting cultured human tissues isn't wrong, is it? Human tissue is *already* a commodity."

"Implanting isn't *eating! That's immoral!* Sweet Jesus, you're talking about *cannibalism!*"

Janna made a face. "That's a pretty loaded word, Del. This is something else altogether." She tried another tack. "All right, we've cultured tissues from endangered species to use as food. Is that wrong? Are we killing them off by

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doing so?" She leaned forward. "*No!* The special fees you and the other food producers pay has helped *preserve* them!"

Del held up his hands. "Look, we could argue this fine bit of ethical philosophy from now to Doomsday. Can't you see what would happen if I did start selling the stuff—going on the assumption that consumers would even *buy* cultured human flesh? God knows what sort of nightmare I could be letting myself in for! The religious backlash alone could sink Del-Licious Foods like a paper boat in a flushed toilet. I would be accused of being everything from the leader of a Cannibal Cult to the Mastermind of a Satanist World Takeover, from the Hitler of Food Processing to the Antichrist himself!"

He lowered his voice. "And what would happen if people got a taste for the stuff, and then started going out and bagging their own? It would be the start of a new Dark Age, every enemy viewed as an entree! Trouble with the poor? Hate your neighbors? Too many kids or niggers? *Eat 'em!* Chaos would reign, but I'd never see it. I would have already been *crucified!*"

"Dean Swift," Slim said softly, proving that he had been paying some attention to what was going on after all. But it appeared that his moment of glory had passed, for he was ignored. Classicists all too often are. That was fine with him, though. There was something he was trying to get a handle on. Something someone had said, some greased-pig thought . . .

"Don't hand me that crap, Del," Janna snapped. "You've been leading the consumer around by the nose for years, and you could sell hotplates in hell if you wanted to. You know as well as I do that nothing is unmarketable if handled right. You were moaning about the *edge* before. Well, now you have it before you on a silver platter." She glanced down at the table. "Plate."

Indeed, Del had returned to his original seat, and the unfinished cutlet was still before him. The table had been left uncleared. Janna had sent the waiter and cooks away while Del was in paying homage to the China God.

Del shuddered, pushing the plate away. Then a gleam came into his eyes. "All right, let's do a market test right here and now." He nudged the plate sideways toward Timmy. "OK," he told his bodyguard. "You know what the damned stuff is. Let's see *you* eat it!"

Timmy shrugged, picked the cut of meat up in his fingers and took a cautious sniff. "Sure smells good." He bit off a chunk and began to chew. In a moment he was wearing the awed face of a ten year old experiencing his first orgasm. In a matter of seconds he demolished the rest of the chop.

He smacked his lips. "Do you think there are any more leftovers out in the kitchen?" he asked hopefully.

Slim caught his eye. "Sure, man," he said quietly. "Go help yourself." Timmy shot a questioning glance at Del, who waved his hand in irritated dismissal.

"Well?" Janna asked smugly. Slim sat there staring at the door Timmy had just gone through, the thoughtful look back on his face.

Del shook his head. "That proves nothing and you know it."

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"But—"

"But *nothing!* The best I will do is buy this culinary travesty and bury it. Yes, that is fitting. Human flesh should be buried, not eaten. I promised to buy it, and so I shall." He leaned forward, his face a forbidding mask. His voice took on an edge that was like steel cutting into processed cheese food.

"But you will accept the price I give you, or I promise you that my lawyers will so bury you in lawsuits, injunctions, and restraining orders, that you won't even be able to produce mystery meat for summer camps when I'm done with you! Do I make myself clear?"

Slim's mouth fell open. He sat bolt upright in his chair as Janna glared at Del. "Don't you *dare* thr—" she began.

"That's *IT!!!!*" Slim erupted out of his chair like a drop-kicked beachball. He began dancing around the room, literally hugging himself with delight, and oblivious to his amazed audience.

"Of *course!*" he crowed, "Right in front of me—he said it! He did! Obvious!" He smote himself in the forehead and laughed aloud, still performing his jiggling jig. "Shouldn't've slipped by the first time, but too much on my mind, the Other Project and all, and kinda nervous besides, had to hear it again for it to click, and it's so—" He suddenly became aware of where he was and what he was doing. He faltered. "Uh—" The bright balloon of his joy deflated, and his round body seemed to deflate with it. He blushed and hung his head in embarrassment.

Timmy had burst back into the room, drawn by Slim's bellow. He halted when he saw that there was no threat to his boss, a half-gnawed cutlet still in his hand. Del had craned his neck to look at the rotund creator of the product which was causing him so much grief. Whether he was aware of it or not, he had picked up a fork, which he held like a dagger.

"Are you . . . all right, dear?" Janna asked carefully, eyeing him a little doubtfully herself. Had he gotten back into the champagne without her knowing about it?

Slim slunk red-faced back to the table. They all watched expectantly as he sat down and seemed to conduct some sort of silent argument with himself. When he at last took a deep breath and began to speak, they had to strain to hear him.

"Timmy said it, but it slipped away." He peeked up at Del's bodyguard and secret advisor. "Do you remember what you said about, um, your boss liking our product?"

Timmy scratched his head. "Wasn't it . . . something about Mr. C's liking it as long as it was some sort of mystery meat?" he answered uncertainly.

Slim nodded approvingly. "That was it. Don't you see?" A look at the blank faces around the table told him that they did not. His ordeal wasn't over yet.

"We—that is *you*, um, sir—market it as just that. Mystery Meat. The, uh, Mysterious Taste Sensation. As long as they don't know what it is they'll love it. They'll, well, you know—" He shot a pleading look at his wife. She stared at him for a long moment, then her eyes widened as comprehension dawned.

"—go *crazy* over it!" she finished smoothly. "Just think of the possibilities! You could—have a *contest!* Name

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the Mystery Meat! Win big prizes! Be in the vidads! It's a perfect misdirection *and* a ready-made promotion all in one! It would be the hottest sell in years! By the time your competitors manage to erase the RNA ID tagging and come out with their own version, you'll have the whole market in your pocket. They won't stand a meatball's chance in Italy at catching up!"

"It might work . . . " Del said slowly. Then he frowned, shaking his head. "Nice try. But sooner or later someone is going to find out what it really is, and then all the reasons I gave you before for not selling it, plus who knows how many more, will come down like a million pound shithammer. That would be the end of everything."

"Not necessarily," Janna replied, her mind racing to find an argument to back up her objection. Then she smiled.

"Aren't the ones most likely to find out what it is the ones trying to copy it to steal it?"

"Yes, I suppose so." Del admitted grudgingly.

Her smile grew wider. "Do you really think they'll blow the whistle on you and miss their chance to grab a slice of the very lucrative market you've created?"

"Nooooo . . . " Del said, sounding half-convinced.

Janna moved in for the kill. "Besides, suppose six months down the line, after it's become *the* hot seller, they do find out? *You* didn't know. Your *developer* didn't know—we were only trying to come up with a new flavor! It will be the joke of the *century!* The Mystery Meat everyone loves so much turns out to be genetically almost identical to human flesh! It will generate the sort of media coverage you just can't buy, and set off a whole new wave of buying! The whole thing's bulletproof! The only way you could lose is by passing it up!"

She sat back, her best pitch delivered. They waited as the Great Man thought the matter over. He sat there, fingers tented, staring off into space. At last he looked at Timmy, who grinned back at him while noisily gnawing on the rest of the cutlet he had brought in from the kitchen.

Del sighed, laying his hands flat on the table.

"Now just what sort of price are we talking about?" he said.

The After-Showing Bath was a long-standing tradition with Slim and Janna. It had begun with a plastic Mr. Turtle Soak Pool filled with lukewarm water and Mr. Bubble back in their first roach-infested loft. Now they had a tub large enough for the both of them and a whole flock of rubber duckies.

Janna looked truly fetching dressed only in the lavender-scented bubbles drifting atop the steaming, neck-deep water. Only Slim's head showed. His thinning hair was plastered across his broad forehead and he was grinning from ear to ear.

"More champagne?" Janna asked in a sultry purr.

Slim looked surprised. "I'm not being rationed?"

"Not tonight. I can't tell you how proud I am of you, darling. You were so brave!"

He looked abashed. "Naw—"

"Oh yes. You stood up to Del even

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after I crumbled. I know how hard that was for you. Will you get mad if I ask why?"

He peered up at her with one twinkling eye. "I never get mad at you." He created a minor tidal wave as he sat up, retrieved his glass, and held it out to be refilled, his plump, pink sausage pinky extended.

She poured with a flourish. "Then why?"

Slim settled back, took a sip, then spoke while staring at the glass. "Well, you know I've been workin' on a new idea, and it's something I really want to try. It's going to take lots of money. He was gonna bankrupt us, and we needed that sale. I had to do *something*."

"Ready to tell me what your new idea is?" She asked carefully. She was pretty curious about it.

"Not quite—I'm not even sure it's possible." He thought for a moment. "But I can maybe give you a hint." He sat up and put the glass aside. "Neomeat culture is pretty easy, given the right medium, environment and nutrients. The meat is alive until it is cut from the tissue block. That kills it. With me so far?" She nodded.

"OK. Now what would happen if it just sort of went on *hold* when it was cut and packaged? What if it remained in some sort of, um, stasis until it encountered certain pre-programmed conditions not too different from its original culturing?"

Janna frowned. "Then it would . . . start growing again?"

Slim beamed at her, slipping a little deeper into the water. "You got it—given the right conditions."

"What . . . kind of conditions?"

"Room temperature or better. Some sort of nutrient. Now remember that neomeat nutrient bath is cheap, and can be made from almost any sort of vegetable material. . . . " He sank deeper yet, his nose just above the bubbles. He began to hum the theme from the old flat-screen movie *Jaws*.

Her frown deepened as well as she groped to understand. "You're not saying that someone could buy one steak and then never—*YIKE!*"

Water sloshed over the tub's side as she jumped. She settled back, her eyebrows raised. "Just what did you think you were doing?" she asked with mock indignation.

He gave her what could only be described as a cherubic leer. "Just pinching the most valuable derriere in all history."

"I'm glad you're *so* fond of it, kind sir. But most valuable?"

"You bet. Where do you think I got the tissue I used to create mystery meat?"

She sat up straighter. "Then you mean—"

"Del said he was going to have your ass. Thanks to that splendid deal you negotiated, he ended up *buying* it, um, in the end." Slim sat back, grinning ear to ear as he retrieved his champagne and took a well-deserved drink.

Moments later Janna was laughing. Not only had Del been the butt of a deliciously subtle joke this time, but if Slim was planning what she thought he was planning, Del was really going to get a run for his money when it was time for them to meat again. ■

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GRAVESITE REVISITED

Elisabeth M...

Some fields of study are forced to construct hypothetical sketches of the past that prove to be a lot older than we commonly realize!

Martin G. Cameron

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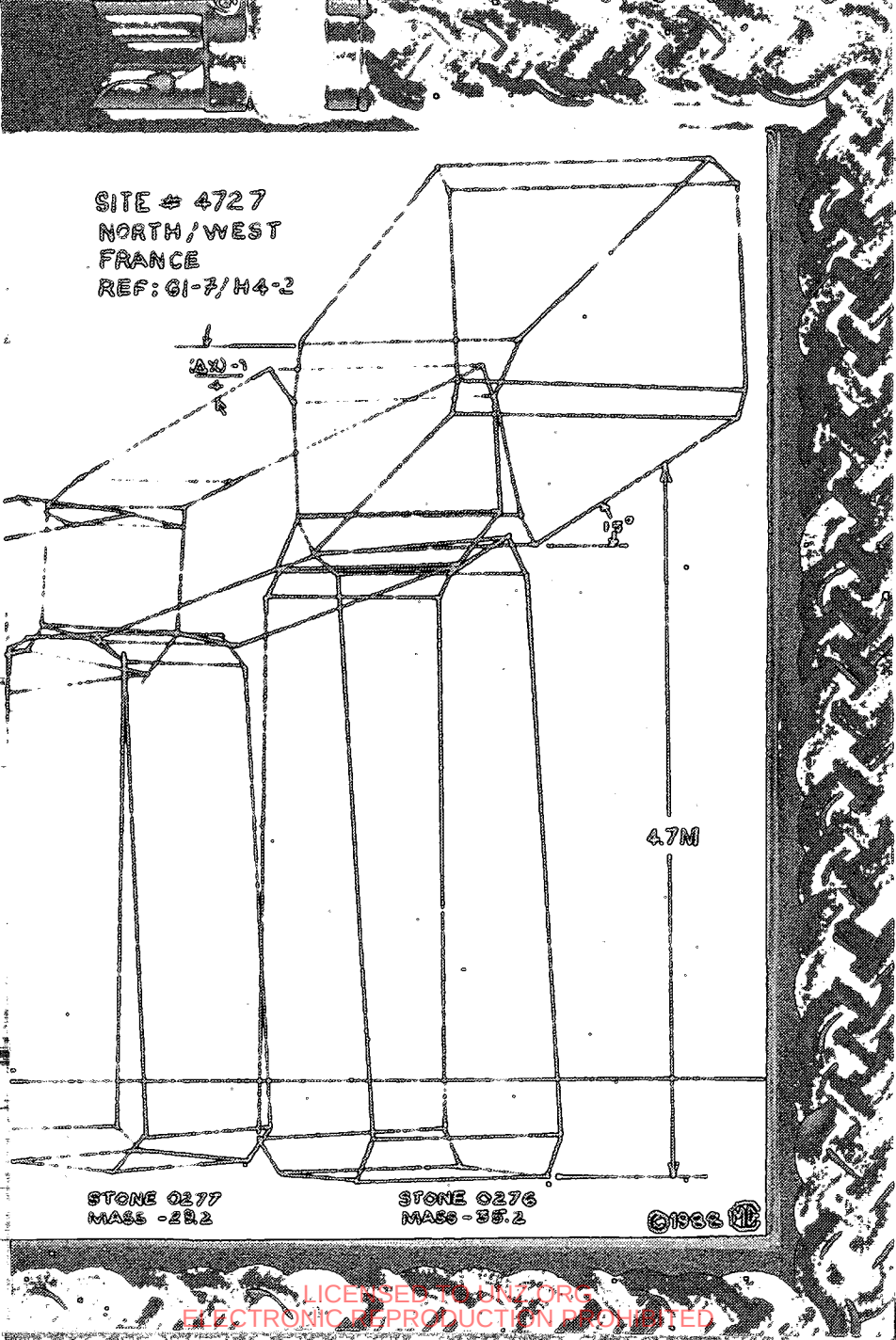

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The old woman held out her hand. Carver froze, crouched over the grave, the reindeer pendant still swinging slightly on its chain of carved bone.

"You know you can't put that in with her," the old woman said.

Carver scowled. "She liked it. She should have it."

"You can't. It's not permitted." The old woman glanced back over her shoulder, and the old man, Longwalker, nodded, emphasizing his agreement.

Carver clenched his fist on the pendant and chain; furious. "I don't understand. She wasn't Wolf Clan. . . . How could it unbalance the world to carry her own clan sign along?"

"It's nothing to do with the hunt's balance," the old woman said. She reached for Carver's hand, and pried up his fingers, then prodded the pendant and chain. "It's this—this chain. The latepeople will see this and think. We don't want them to think."

"The latepeople?" Carver had lived in Molder's family for only four years; he knew there were many secrets they had yet to share with him. By her father's clan, her seedclan, she was Reindeer, but her mother's clan, her bloodclan, were Ash, godtalkers. And the old woman, whose name he had never heard, being an outsider and only Molder's chosen childfather, she was Ash. She had foreseen Molder's death in a fall, and had withheld warning, for she was Ash, and spoke warnings only at the gods' will, though she saw (Molder had told him once) all things that would come until the end of the world.

"The latepeople, those who will come when the times change," the old woman said. "'The latepeople find our bones, and our graves—"

"They dig up graves?" Carver was shocked. Animals dug up graves, but only because they were the Elder People, and had rights humans did not share.

"Yes, indeed, they dig up graves. And when they find what they want in a grave, they travel backwards until it is new, and rob it."

"Backwards? In time?"

"Yes. As I see forward, which is proper for an Ash, and a gift of the gods, they see backwards, and travel backwards, by witchcraft."

Carver shuddered. The past was past; he had been taught that the past was unbreakable, the foundation of time. Mistakes could not be unmade, so all acts must be carefully considered, but anything done rightly was as safe from error as a mistake from correction. To travel backwards, to tamper with the past, was obscene. The old woman nodded at his expression.

"They are witches," she said. "Empty hearts, fearing their future, looking for treasures to rob in the past." She smiled without humor. "We give them nothing to think about, nothing to rob."

"But her spirit—" Carver's people made better graves, he thought. Had thought before, and had not said, being a stranger among Molder's people. It was discourteous to criticize the wife's family. But his people laid food and tools with the dead, on a nest of flowers (in spring and summer) or fur (in winter), and a gift from each person close in relation or in feeling. He had grown up knowing that the dead lived in the shadowed lands, yet hungered for mor-

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tal food and the love of mortals. If not fed or gifted, they might come back as haunts, angry spirits who stole away children or even sprinkled death pollen over a whole encampment, so that sickness bloomed in terrible shades of red and white.

The old woman grimaced, and gestured him away from the grave, the sad little hole where Molder lay curled on her side, nested on nothing but the old piece of hide she had liked to sit on while she worked, the wound in her head against the damp soil. Carver moved stiffly, still angry and worried. Finally she stopped, crouching under a bush, and gestured for him to sit down. He lowered himself slowly to the ground.

"I am an Ash," the old woman began. Carver shivered; her voice had the tone and cadence of the nightfire chants. "Ash are the godtalkers, and the gods gift Ash with vision of times to come. Days and days, and seasons of days, winters and springs more than anyone's life, and the latepeople, the witches, will be born."

"There are witches now," said Carver, very politely. "Are the latepeople born to the witch clans?"

"We have no witches now!" the old woman said angrily. "No witches!" Carver sat stunned. All his life he had heard of witches. His father's older brother had been killed by a witch, tranced into sleep in a storm, and frozen: that was true. His father had demanded a callsong, and a visitor from another camp had come, answering that call, and been speared by all the men, and hung from a tree. A witch, his father had told him, and yanked him back from touching any of that dangerous blood. The other tribe had never complained, which meant they had known they harbored a witch—but killing a witch in the tribe was harder than letting another do it.

"My father's brother—" he began, but the old woman stabbed a finger at him, and he clamped his mouth shut.

"No witches like the latepeople will be," she said. "Now we have one or another who makes a bargain with the wrong gods. One person may be killed, perhaps two or three. But it is all water running downhill, as water should do. Your father's brother—I know about that. He boasted to that witch about his skill in foreseeing storms, and more shame to him that was no Ash, but a Mink. What does a Mink know about storms? So that one gave him drink sweetened with wild honey, and he drank more than he should, and slept on a night when the moon was ringed by cloud, and snow came. Is that witchery? No, you could do that, if you wished."

Carver could not imagine it, giving death in the drink of welcome.

"He didn't mean to kill your father's brother. He thought to have him boast more, and then waken to snow in the camp, safe but shamed. But your father's brother quarreled with another, and walked out into the darkness, and no one would follow. There he died, when the snow came. The witch came to your father's callsong, yes, but he already knew he must die."

"But he was a witch—"

"No. Not like the latepeople. Listen, Carver, and I will tell you. But this is a secret, and you must not tell others."

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He touched his hand to his own clan emblem, and she went on.

"It was in my mother's day that we first noticed it. Like your people, we made comfortable graves for our dead then: nests of soft grass or fur, and grave-gifts to comfort them in the shadow lands. Even the winter graves had flowers, for we dried the yellow lilies of the swamps, and saved them, so that all the dead would have color and light in the darkness. And we did something else, which no other people I know of tried to do. When we could, we buried our dead with their kin: bloodclan with bloodclan, in joined graves, then linked head to foot, so that the Eldest could be honored by their descendants.

"My mother told me that she was just swelling with her first child when the people returned to their summerlands one year and found all the graves open. Freshly open."

Carver stiffened, and the old woman nodded.

"Yes, it was shocking. At first they thought a plague of bears or wolves had torn the graves open, or the earth itself had split, but the best hunters looked carefully and said no. There were prints enough in the ground: some of people with strange clothing on their feet, some of animals with no feet at all, a pattern like this—" And the old woman scooped the reindeer pendant from Carver's hand, and pressed the chain into the ground, then again beside the first print, leaving an odd pattern that looked like nothing he had seen.

"*People* had robbed the graves," the old woman went on. "They had taken the bones of the dead, and all the grave gifts in the most recent graves, those of the year before." She paused a long time. Carver sat thinking about it, what they must have thought, coming on those graves all open to the sky, as Molder's was now. He would have been terrified of the spirits, sure that the air was full of death pollen. But these people had the Ash Clan with them, the godtalkers, so they may have felt less fear.

"My mother told me that everyone went a day's journey away to camp, walking all night. They were frightened of the dead, and of the people who had taken them. But a man of Ash, and three hunters, went back very early the next day. And what do you think they found?"

"The latepeople?"

"No. Worse. The next day, they found the graves still open, but open for a long time. Deserted, empty, weathered: the hollows nearly filled in the older graves, grass and moss growing all over." She peered at Carver's face, intent on something he could not imagine. "You don't understand?"

"No." Open graves weathering overnight? It had to be witchcraft, but nothing he had ever imagined. Why would a witch do that?

"It had been years—*years* since the graves opened. Years in a night. The man of Ash then burned sweet woods, and spoke in a way we know of, we of Ash, and the gods answered. By their wisdom, he could see that it was the latepeople. Far in the future, in their own time, they found one grave. In it was that which made them search for another. And by witchcraft then they walked back in time, just as a man might walk upstream to find the place where

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berries grow, if he sees one float by in the water. And they found our gravesite, and robbed it, and then came back earlier, and robbed it again, in what was to our people a day and a night, at most."

"Did anyone ever see them?"

The old woman looked away. "Some have said so. Some say they take the children who disappear—that it is not *our* witches, but those latepeople witches. I have not seen them myself. But I know what they look for, and where. If our dead are to have any comfort, and be safely housed until the gods turn the world over, we must leave them nothing to interest the latepeople. I have seen graves opened, and left alone, when no treasure was in them. Now. Give me that pendant."

So compelling was her voice that Carver had opened his hand again before he thought. The old woman took the pendant and chain, and led him to a small tree growing nearby.

"The young trees are best, Carver. Old trees may die, or blow down. Choose always one too large for the reindeer or other horned ones to break when they clean their antlers, but one small enough to live long." With her best blade, the old woman slit the bark, lifted a section, slipping the blade underneath as a skilled hunter skinned game, and pressed the pendant and chain under it. "We never place more than one gift in a tree. Some things can be buried under a live root, where the root will grow over it. The dead are not like us: they can reach their gifts even through the wood of trees, or the roots. As long as we give them clues." Now she twisted off a twig of that tree, and took it to the grave, where she dropped it carelessly onto Molder's folded body. Carelessly? Carver looked up as another twig fell along Molder's cheek, and saw the old woman nod toward another tree. One by one the family came, each dropping a twig—in one case a pebble—beside the dead woman. And then they closed the grave, piling stones more carelessly than Carver's people—or more carefully, he finally thought, watching the caution with which they chose stones and placed them.

"She will sleep long, and waken without pain," said the old woman. "When the gods turn the world over, she will have her other children."

"It's got to be climate." Ann leaned on the counter and squinted at the computer screen. Her new glasses were driving her nuts: bifocals were not the answer. She wanted the new surgery. Maybe next year, if the bigger grant came through.

"Invasion," said Chris. He was being difficult, as usual.

"Climate. It matches with the onset of the interglacial—"

"You think you take four lousy trips backtime, and you know everything."

"I know four trips more than you do." She knew he thought she was being bitchy, but she did have four trips back to stone age Europe, and he had yet to be cleared for one.

"You never even *saw* them. You just robbed graves. You can't be sure of anything just from the graves—"

"Chris, you're never going to get clearance for backtime research if you stay an interventionist. No one is about to let any of us make actual contact with

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the primitives." Ann punched up the climate data again. The match wasn't exact, but then the climate data were approximations from pollen analysis —old dates, not direct measurement. They couldn't leave a team onsite in the past long enough to do climate studies, much as she'd have loved it. The match was close enough. Warming climate had sent the prim's main prey north, had changed their society, and that must be why their grave customs changed, from the lavishly decorated and prepared graves of the previous centuries to the plain, stark burials she'd found recently.

Chris leaned over her shoulder, peering at the screen. "That stuff's outdated. Pollen analysis! If you'd put a team down for even one week, real time, in decent weather, and let them do an astronomical scan—"

"Interference."

"Who cares? Those old stone-carvers? Ann, what if they do see a team? They won't know what it is. They're savages, primitive, superstitious—they'll just call 'em gods and run away. Didn't you say you'd found contemporary tracks at Site 402?"

Ann pushed her chair back slightly and bumped into his knees. Site 402 still scared the hell out of her. They'd gone in, found a couple of six-month-old graves, still untouched, and some other obvious graves nearby. They'd done a bounce-scan and decided to drop back fifty years, then another fifty: a fast in-and-out each time, plucking the graves clean. Then a final stop at the first time, maybe a day later real-time, and they'd seen tracks. Human tracks, recent, clear evidence that some of the primitives had arrived just after the first sampling. How long after? Ann still wondered if they'd come before, or after, the older graves *changed*. And had the graves changed *then*, at the theoretical fork in time, or along the main line back when they'd been opened?

She mentioned that chilling possibility. Chris shook his head.

"Ann, they can't think—not like we can. They won't be able to reason anything out. And if they did figure it was people from the future, what could they do?"

"I don't know." It was the not knowing that was worst. Would they fumble around for a new set of words to express that concept? Would they migrate away from the place where their graves had been robbed? What could they do, primitive hunters that they were? They couldn't change history, surely. "It doesn't matter, anyway," she said, pushing all that aside. "What matters is this paper for the meeting, and that means coming up with a reasonable explanation for the change in burial practices. Climate fits well enough. If you have to hunt different animals in the same place, or follow familiar animals to new places, you won't have time to accumulate the same quantity of grave goods, or build elaborate graves—"

"Behavior is conservative. I still think it's invasion—different people, with different customs. Look what you found this last time: twigs and pebbles in the graves, with nothing but a scrap of skin under the bodies. Stones carelessly tossed on top. If you'd brought back even one whole gravesite, we could have found evidence of a new culture—"

"It wasn't worth it. Chris, the body

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type's the same. Biochem sampling on the one indicates it's the same genetic type, same everything . . . they just aren't putting any cultural goods in the graves, and it has to be because they can't afford to, they don't have enough. An impoverished culture, struggling to maintain its way of life—"

"*Twigs!* Dammit, that's a different religion." She was fascinated that the change from carved bones to uncarved twigs could excite him on religion, but the possibility of a resurrection myth didn't move him at all. "Ann, think about it. They used to bury their dead with carved bone and wood: animals, mostly. Bits of stone, yes, but carved or shaped into ornamental items. Carved bone buttons, awls, that amber whatsit from Site 327, fancy leather items. Animals, dammit. Not twigs, not plant life. Maybe it's not an invasion, but something's made them start worshipping trees instead of reindeer and wolves."

"A climate change could do that. Forest expanding, with higher temperatures, or—"

Chris leaned against the wall, and she could tell he was thinking about it. She considered the possibility herself. A change in religion leading to tree worship? Certainly there was tree worship later in Europe, on the edge of historical time. Trees hung with offerings to forest deities, trees in sacred groves. But would people really change from worshipping animal totems to trees just because the forest was expanding? She tried to think herself back into a primitive mind . . . would they see it as trees chasing the animals away? It didn't make sense, but then primitives didn't have to make sense. They were primitive, nonrational, that was the whole point. . . .

Two summers later, Carver saw that Molder's grave had not been disturbed. The bulge of his gift was hardly noticeable now beneath the bark of its tree. He plucked a twig from it, and dropped it on the stones piled not-quite-carelessly atop Molder's grave. They had had good luck, the past seasons, and he wished he could share more with her spirit. But the others agreed that their luck lay partly in the quiet rest of their dead . . . a rest that depended on fooling the witches of the future. He still found it hard to think about, the way they could walk backwards through time and change the past. Why would they rob graves, when they could gain more power by undoing their own mistakes? He thought what he could do with such ability—prevent Molder's fall, find where the herds had gone when they didn't appear in the usual ranges, know which trail he should have taken, and what had happened to those who disappeared. He would not bother to find old graves and rob them. Unless the dead had more power than anyone had believed until now, more power even than the spread of death pollen.

But they had fooled the latecomer witches. This tribe, at least, was safe from them, its dead resting peacefully and properly gifted throughout time. Once he believed, he'd wanted to tell the others, at the trading sites and hunting conclaves, but the old woman of Ash had forestalled him.

"We must first protect ourselves," she had said. "If the witches find no graves' goods to rob, they may rob bare

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bones or search the trees for gifts, and leave us to the wrath of our dead. Other tribes have godtalkers of their own—if they listen truly, they can learn for themselves." And she had bound him with terrible oaths, so that he could not tell even his mother's brother, when they met at the rapids of the river where the fish leaped into their baskets, answering their need.

"Climate," Chris finally agreed. "It's spread through the whole region, and no invaders could move that fast. There wouldn't be that many of them, anyway. But I still think it was a change in religion, not just cultural impoverishment from the climatic change. Some weird superstition, maybe like the Ghost Dancing thing in the American Indians."

"Wish I knew how it started," said Ann. Now that he agreed it was climate, she found herself looking for something else. "A big storm, or bad year, or what?"

"A god came out of the sky and told them to put twigs in the graves instead of tools," said Chris sarcastically. "It could have been anything. Primitives don't think—they just react."

"Whatever. We might as well cancel the rest of the series. It's not worth it, spending all that money to find scraps of deerskin and twigs. We already have enough botanical samples; we need more artifacts. And since they've quit putting the graves in clusters, it's getting damned hard to find one at all. We can come all the way up to Neolithic, and get a lot more for our money."

Carver sat nearest the fire, an honor due his age and position in the tribe. He sang the Year Dance, and it was to him that the godtalker spoke of plans and seasons. His sons and daughters carried his seedclan here and there across the hunting grounds. And this night he had proclaimed the good news: the Ash Clan reported from all the campfires that the latecomer witches had departed from their graverobbing. In less than three lifetimes of men, they had come, and robbed, and departed, fooled by the wisdom of the godtalkers and those who loved their dead enough to send them bare into the afterworld. For three more lifetimes, the Ash decreed, they must leave grave gifts only in secret, outside the graves, but after that it would be safe to restore honor as it had always been. He thought, himself, that this was needless: if the dead were happy enough with their grave gifts in trees and roots and hollow stone, why not continue that way? It hadn't hurt the trees any.

He wondered, in the sleepiness that often overtook him now in the long firelit evenings, what the latecomer witches had thought when their luck ran out and the graves held no treasure. Had they returned to making their own tools and tokens? Had they spent the gift of timewalking on better things? Had they finally learned that walking backwards was wrong, that the power of the dead could not be used well by the living? The Ash would not say, for the gods had not commanded that song. ■

●No object is mysterious. The mystery is in your eye.

Elizabeth Bowen

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The Alternate View

DYSON ON SPACE

John G. Cramer

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Professor Freeman Dyson was a visitor for two weeks at the University of Washington, where I'm a member of the physics faculty. He presented a series of lectures dealing broadly with the problems of large scientific projects and with strategies for success in such endeavors. I'd been in London during the early part of his visit, but I returned just in time to attend his last lecture, which was devoted to the past and future of the U.S. space program. We also had a lively and wide-ranging conversation, over lunch, on the last day of his visit. This column, based on this lecture and conversation, is a report on Professor Dyson's views on our troubled space program.

Freeman Dyson has a well-deserved reputation as a truly original thinker. He helped to conceive Project Orion, a hydrogen-bomb-powered starship concept, and his name is associated with the Dyson sphere, the ultimate solar-energy based civilization. Whenever there are two conflicting opinions on a controversial technical subject, be it disarmament, nuclear power, or construction of big accelerators, Dyson can be depended upon to propose a strikingly original third opinion, always logical and well-considered, which bears little resemblance to either of the other two. In the case of the space program, his views stand in striking contrast to those of both the "get humans into space at whatever cost" camp and the "dump manned spaceflight and do space science with machines" advocates.

Dyson, who characterizes himself as a "hard-core space cadet," feels, in essence, that men and machines both have their places in space, and that a balanced scientific program of exploration and discovery must exploit the strengths of both. He also feels that scientific priorities should rate far higher in decision making than has been the case in many of NASA's manned endeavors, from Mercury and Apollo to the Shuttle and the Space Station project.

Dyson's lecture started by discussing "a path not taken," Werner von Braun's bold 1952 proposal for a manned expedition to explore Mars. Von Braun described a massive undertaking requiring 46 ferry vessels (shuttles) transporting 37,000 tons of hardware into Earth orbit, where equipment would be assembled to move 70 men and 4,200 tons of equipment into Mars orbit, from which 50 tons of equipment would descend in three ships onto the surface of the planet. The expedition would have used essentially WWII technology, and von Braun estimated that it would cost "about as much as a minor military expedition in a limited theater of war."

Dyson contrasted this dream with the realities of the Apollo project that came to fruition 15 years later. Von Braun

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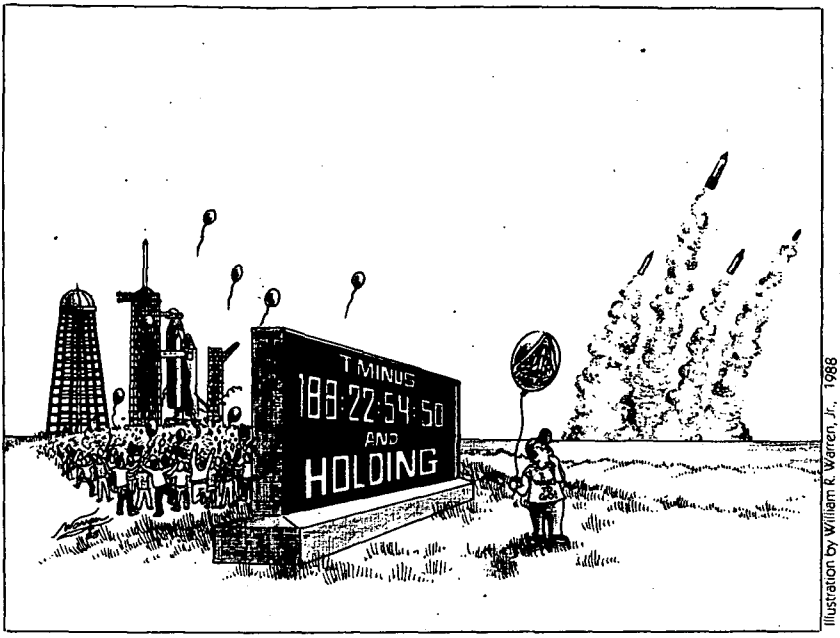

Illustration by William K. Warren, Jr., 1988

had naively specified a 1 kHz bandwidth for the communication channel between the Mars expedition and Earth, a channel too narrow for even voice communication. The Mars expedition would have communicated by the equivalent of Morse code. By contrast, Apollo was designed and executed in the glare of international television coverage and required a communication bandwidth thousands of times broader.

Dyson characterized the Apollo project as a brilliant success precisely because it was "conceived and honestly presented to the public as *an international sporting event* and not as a contribution to science." This was symbolized by the first item to be unpacked after landing on the moon's surface, the television camera. He observed that the landings, the comings and goings of the astronauts, the explorations of the moon's surface, the gatherings of moon rocks, and the Earth-ward departures all were expertly choreographed with the cameras placed in the right positions to make a dramatic spectacle for television.

Scientifically, however, Apollo was a dry hole. No big scientific surprises came from the chemistry of the moon rocks or the magnetic and seismic observations that the astronauts carried out on the lunar surface. It was no surprise, either, that humans were indeed able to walk on the moon, to drive moon buggies, to hit a golf ball, and to bring back moon rocks. The big surprise of Apollo was the high quality of the public entertainment, and this came at a high cost to science.

Dyson then speculated on how some hypothetical NASA with an active in-

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terest in science *might* have structured the Apollo project within the same time and cost boundaries to produce good science as well as good entertainment. The main thing that was lacking in Apollo for good science was *time*. The six Apollo landings each placed two astronauts on the lunar surface for up to three days with about two tons of supplies and equipment for life support and exploration. For all of Apollo, there were a total of about 50 man-days of lunar exploration using a total of 12 tons of equipment, or about four man-days of exploration per ton of equipment.

That's very inefficient. Von Braun envisioned 130 man-days of exploration of Mars per ton of equipment. Dyson suggested that 40 man-days/ton might be a more realistic compromise. If half of Apollo's lunar landings had been done by unmanned freight carriers, each of these could have deposited at least 18 tons of additional supplies on the lunar surface. That would have provided a team of six astronauts with 60 tons of supplies and equipment, sufficient for a 400 day mission of lunar exploration. That comes to 2,400 man-days of exploration instead of the 50 man-days of Apollo.

With this much time, Dyson suggested, the Apollo project might have achieved some significant science. There would have been time to explore the lunar poles, to circumnavigate the body, to set up radio-astronomy dishes on the moon's radio-quiet back side, to take the time to investigate, theorize, observe, test, and probe. There would have been the time and opportunity to bring into play those intrisically human skills which have led in previous years long voyages of discovery to new insights and understanding.

The real Apollo, of course, was carried out in a few days by test pilots operating at a dead run, with one eye on the clock and the other on the prime-time news schedule. There was simply no time for science. Dyson's revisionist version of Apollo is another road not taken.

Dyson then turned from "the brilliant success of Apollo" to "the dismal failure of the space shuttle." The shuttle was supposed to be cheap, to be reliable, to be easy to service and reuse, and it was supposed to be a frequent flier. Above all, it was supposed to be safe. As it turns out, it is none of these things. Dyson characterized the shuttle both as a "turkey" and as a "lame horse." A *turkey* in Air Force slang is a bird that can hardly fly. The shuttle is a turkey because it can only just fly into a low orbit. It has no margin of safety, no extra capability for taking payloads to the higher orbits needed by many scientific projects. It is a *lame horse* because as soon as one problem is corrected, another problem appears.

Dyson remarked that the shuttle is a prime example of the "Problem of Premature Choice," a prevalent failing of government which he characterized as "betting all your money on one horse before you have found whether she is lame." When a project is sufficiently large that the "waste" of exploring more than one engineering alternative becomes embarrassing to public officials, they find the urge to immediately select one alternative and to kill all the others almost irresistible.

Dyson suggested that such anticipa-

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tion of nature is a fundamental mistake. The evolution of science and technology is a Darwinian process of natural selection. Public officials attempt to make the process "more efficient" by short-circuiting the selection process, jumping the gun on nature's choices by preselecting one of them, usually the one which is largest and preserves the most existing jobs. It is a paradox that the secret of efficiency in natural selection is waste, the "waste" of providing a number of alternatives that can be tested against one another in true competition. The shuttle lacked such competition, and our space program is now suffering for it.

Dyson contrasted the shuttle with another space project, the International Ultraviolet Explorer or IUE. This little-known space observatory was launched in January, 1978, using a reliable Delta rocket. The Delta, like the Saturn-5 of the Apollo program, has been phased out by NASA management, killed to prevent competition with the Shuttle.

The IUE, with mirrors supplied by NASA, television detector system from the UK, and solar power system by the European Space Agency, was designed to operate in a geosynchronous orbit for about three years. It has now been operating for more than a decade. During that period it has been used by over 1,000 astronomers and astrophysicists to observe for ultraviolet and visible light the wavelength spectra of over 50,000 stellar objects, scientific investigations that have resulted in the publication of over 1,000 scientific papers. The IUE was in orbit when supernova SN1987A burst upon the scientific community and had provided the most detailed and accurate light curves ever measured for this rare stellar event. The Hubble Space Telescope, with 50 times the resolution of IUE and able to study 10,000 times fainter objects, is still waiting on the ground for a working shuttle to take it into orbit.

Dyson, having summarized the past 30 years of the space program, concluded his talk with some guesses as to the shape of the next 30 years. He believes that NASA's big and visible projects, the shuttle and the Space Station, will from the perspective of 30 years in the future, appear as quaint and misguided gargantuan ventures in the wrong direction, the von Hindenbergs and Titanics of the late 20th century. He feels that the successful space activities of the future will bear little resemblance to NASA's present long range plans. Manned spaceflight will emphasize biology, learning how to grow crops and establish an ecological basis for permanent human settlement. Most of the basic groundwork of exploring the solar system will be done with "smart" space-faring probes exploiting the emerging techniques of bioengineering and nanotechnology. The space projects of 30 years in the future will be as far ahead of today's IUE in sophistication and information bandwidth as IUE is ahead of the von Braun's Mars expedition.

I've just returned from Vancouver, B.C., where I was a Science Guest of Honor at V-Con. Dr. David Stephenson, a Canadian space scientist, remarked there that each nation seems to play its own national game in space. The Russians play chess, plotting their moves with a strategy that looks decades

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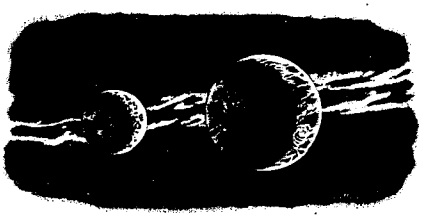
into the future. The Japanese play Go, systematically surrounding each technological territory with their pieces until they make it their own. The Europeans play bridge, kicking a lot under the table while presenting a smooth performance above its surface. And what of the U.S.? Well, in the 1960s we were playing Monopoly. But now, under the present policies of NASA, we seem to have switched to Trivial Pursuit. . . .

By the time you read this some four to six months from now, our democratic processes will have elected a new president. He will, among other things, have to decide what to do about the NASA problem. At minimum a new NASA Administrator must be appointed, and perhaps the space agency will also be restructured as some critics are presently suggesting. Will there be further plodding along the dismal path that has lead from the triumph of Apollo to the *Challenger* disaster? Will the agency continue to place science far down in the priority queue, going always for the premature choice and the job security of mammoth engineering projects? Will NASA continue to withhold any investments in the future, in advanced propulsion technologies, and in new ideas? I hope not.

I hope that the new president will choose carefully when making the decisions on the new head for NASA and on whether to restructure the agency. The new president can get advice from anyone he chooses. I think that he should have a very long talk with Freeman Dyson. ■



●Whoever starts out toward the unknown must consent to venture alone.

Andre Gide

●The average man's judgment is so poor, he runs a risk every time he uses it.

E.W. Howe

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STEP TROLLS

Kevin Robinson

Sometimes peaceful coexistence is e...
if you have a certain secret ingredient—
but that's hard to maintain indefinitely!

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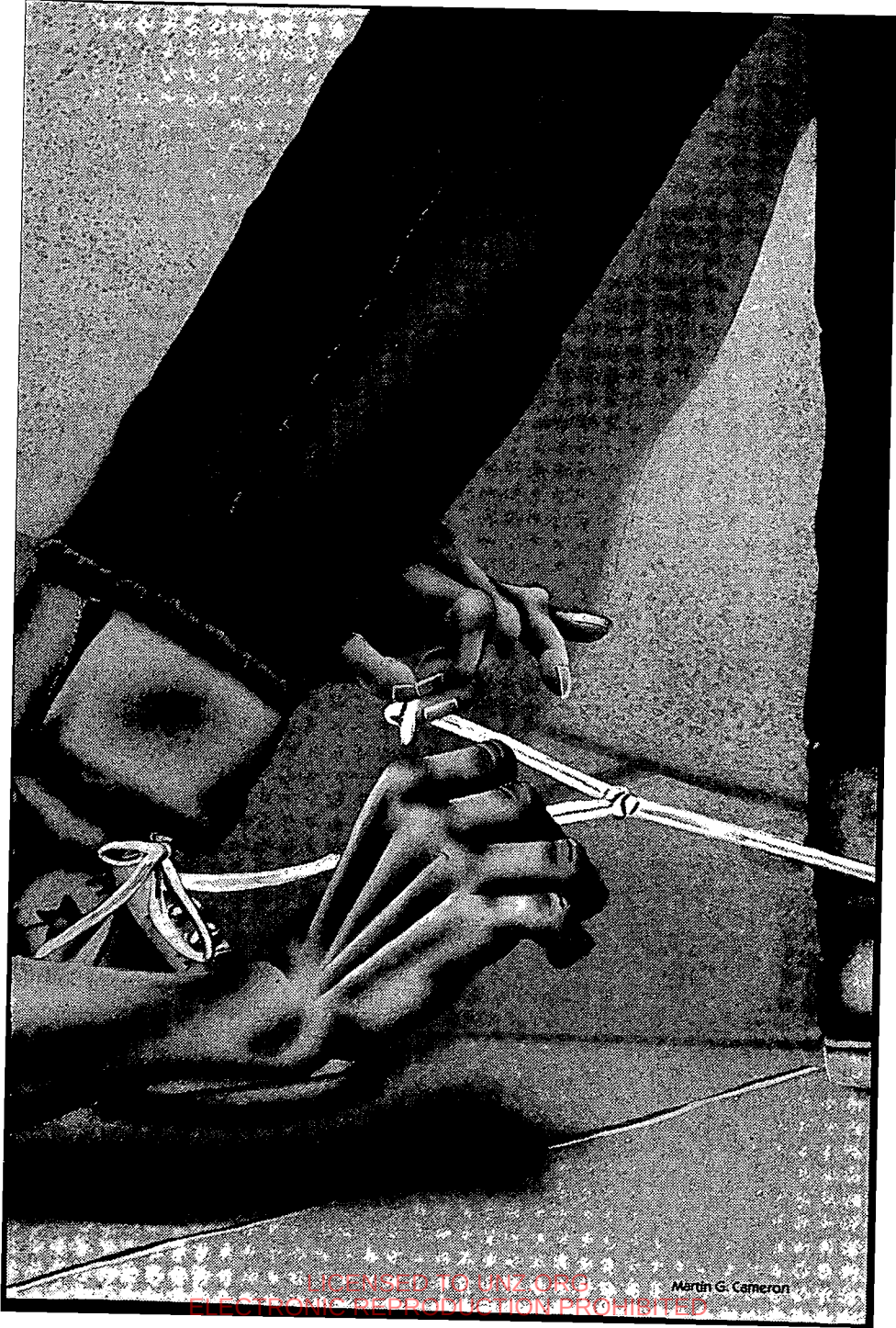

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Many years ago—according to the children's tales—when life was simpler, there was a place for everything and everything had its place. Unicorns inhabited the dark forest; dragons occupied winding lairs in the cliffs above the sea; griffins made their aeries in the craggy mountain peaks; and trolls hid under quiet country bridges. Nothing lasts forever.

They are not at all happy—being found out after so many years—but the Step Trolls bear me a grudging respect nonetheless. It is, after all, their own cleverness that has enabled them to adapt and survive . . . long after any trace of unicorns, dragons, and griffins disappeared from the face of the Earth. It is sad—in a way—that so many years of covert history should be exposed in such a short time; but the Step Trolls, at least, will never underestimate me again.

Before he died, my grandfather used to say, "Bud, success and failure are on opposite sides of a long wall of stones. Most of us spend our lives walking along the top, struggling to maintain our balance on the loose rocks. We call it 'getting by.' We're afraid to fall to the one side and terrified to make the jump to the other. The older you get, the more unlikely it is that you will find the nerve to jump. The fall, however, becomes inevitable."

He always stopped at that point and lit his pipe. As a youngster, I was certain that there would be more to the story, but that was it. All at once, thirty years later, my grandfather's parable made sense to me, and I quit my day job at the paper. It was a decision which left our budget imperiled and my wife dismayed.

"It will get better, Bud," she pleaded. "You won't have to cover lost puppies and Gray Panther meetings forever."

"It's not that," I said.

"What then? Are you having one of those mid-life things?"

"I don't think so." It was a troubling thought, but I waved it off. "No, it's nothing like that. Trust me."

"It's just so sudden. Shouldn't you think it over? We can't live on what you make as a security guard."

"Impulsive decisions are my life!" I tried humor. "Have my instincts ever failed us before?"

The silence was unsettling.

I did not set out to look for trolls. In fact, I had only the vaguest idea what a troll was; and that, from the wildly exaggerated picture books in the children's section of my local bookstore. No, I quit my job and threatened my marriage in order to search out the cause of a phenomenon that everyone has experienced, but no one had confronted.

Before my book, *DOWNSTAIRS: A History of Trolls in America*, was published and I began my current tour of the lecture circuit and the TV talk shows, most people gave little thought to those annoying and embarrassing moments when one foot (or both) seemed to be stuck suddenly to the floor, causing—more often than not—a buckling or lurching collapse.

It nearly always happens in a crowded place, and we invariably look back, searching for a telltale wrinkle in the carpeting or a break in the black rubber

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stair covering; but the fact remains: there is never anything there.

At first I wandered aimlessly, soon discovering that phenomenon does not occur on command. I needed to narrow the odds; so, putting aside the premature field work, and recalling something of my college statistics classes, I decided to compile a relational data base from which I could—hopefully—access commonalities.

My search for raw data began at the local shopping mall. No one challenged my right to join the ranks of clip-board toting ladies, so I asked specific questions about when, where, and how people experienced their most embarrassing and unexplained tumbles.

When I fed the data into my personal computer, several patterns emerged. First, more often than not, the worst trip-ups occurred while both hands were full—carrying groceries, popcorn, soft drinks, laundry, etc. Secondly, if it were not a darkened place altogether, the area of footfall, at least, was usually shadowed and/or dimly lit. One reoccurring peculiarity in my "findings" was the suggestion that this type of tripping seldom if ever plagued the elderly or the well-behaved child. (Surly, preppy, and ill-disposed youngsters told of countless occurrences—some remarking bitterly about their parent's poorly guarded laughter. "Something grabbed me," was a common claim, but the elders always rolled their eyes and sighed.)

Out of its present context, of course, most of the information on the print-out seemed useless; still, I accepted the obvious and went back to the field work with a shopping bag in each arm.

Every morning, a midtown bus stops at the corner of 55th and Roe before bullying its way into the city proper. The disaster that accompanied my ill-fated boarding nearly got me thrown back off on my ear. With one hand wriggling for change in the front pocket of my Levis and the other trying to stabilize two brown bagfuls of my twelve-year-old daughter's "room clutter," my left Reebok court shoe froze inextricably to the second step. I wasn't prepared for the resultant havoc. The bag of semi-nude Barbie dolls in my right arm emptied across the driver's lap while the other sack sailed out of my left arm, raining teddy bears, stuffed rabbits, and puce-colored ponies on startled passengers throughout the first three rows.

My fellow riders—even the chagrined and red-faced driver—responded sympathetically at first. It was only when I took the flashlight from my back pocket, crawled head-first into the black and silver stairwell, and attempted to disassemble the middle step with my bare hands that everyone's true morning disposition came to the fore. I'm sure that *most* of the threats were benign, but others—including the driver's hissing expletives—led me to gather up my debris and slink quietly to a seat in the back of the bus.

I went through the motions for the rest of the day, tripping just once . . . stepping off 12th Street near a dark storm sewer grate. Evening passersby gave me wide berth while I explored the dark hole with my flashlight; but there was nothing to be seen and the aroma was not conducive to extended research. Besides, I was anxious to be at the city garage when my ill-fated Metro bus returned for the night—less its driver.

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* * *

Stanley Potts, the young maintenance supervisor, seemed willing to humor me . . . after I assured him that I was a writer, not an aggravated citizen gathering evidence for a lawsuit.

"I've stumbled like that too," he laughed, loosening the four big silver screws on the middle step riser, "but what makes you think there's more to it than my own clumsiness?"

"My wife keeps asking me the same question." I shrugged. "It's just a hunch, I guess."

I stood tensed, flashlight at the ready, as the man lifted out the metal plate.

"See," he said, "nothing."

I don't know what I expected, but what I saw was all very ordinary. Stanley was grinning.

"What's this?" I asked, shining the flashlight at a small rectangular plate on the discarded riser.

"I don't know," he said. "Some buses got 'em, some don't. It's an inspection plate, I suppose, but there's nothing back here to inspect. Anyway, with all those screws around it, it's easier to take the whole riser off like we just did."

My cab ride home was a long one.

Over the next few weeks, I fell on my face in every corner of the city and throughout the greater metropolitan area. Oh, I quit carrying my daughter's toys —choosing instead a relatively harmless selection of dust rags and second string bath towels—but even a youngish middle-aged man can only collapse so many times before the mounting damage begins to tell. My knees, elbows, and shins—darkened and swollen—tortured me each morning . . . daring me, like the aging athlete, to suit up one more time.

My self-esteem dropped faster than my pain tolerance level, and my once warm and loving wife and daughter seemed to forget my name. If there was indeed "something" out there, it was having a field day at my expense. Otherwise, I was probably a nut-case and definitely a klutz. At least that was better than having a mid-life crisis.

A growing state of possession fed my warped spirit and drove my crippled body. Scientific method gave way to sullen anger. At a Wednesday morning "shopper's special" matinee, while limping my way to a seat in the front of the theater, *something* grabbed my ankle. Not my heel, not my toe, not the sole of my Reeboks . . . but my ankle. It was a rage that comes only with the sudden threat of lunacy that enabled me to spin violently and dive at the darkened step behind me.

The iron hold on my ankle released in an instant, but I slammed my right forearm at the invisible riser, backed by the full weight of my body. To my amazement, it gave way, swinging inward, and my arm disappeared beneath the step above. Three high-pitched yelps interrupted the previews of coming attractions—mine, the approaching usherette's, and *something* behind the swinging stair riser.

While I thrashed wildly on the worn red carpet, searching blindly with my right hand for the trickster beneath the floor, the terrified adolescent in the black vest and white blouse dropped her flashlight and ran from the auditorium

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crying, "Mr. Peevy! Mr. Peevy!" Patrons in the aisle seats moved nervously away in both directions.

The feature attraction lit the screen as Mr. Peevy—a slight man with darting eyes—arrived and asked me, politely, to join him in his office. He obviously lacked experience dealing with psychotic behavior and fear showed plainly on his face.

"First," I said firmly, "I want you to see this."

He stammered something inaudible, but I grabbed his well-pressed black sleeve and jerked him to his knees.

"You too!" The usherette backed away until I aimed my flashlight on her face. "Now!"

The girl returned, sobbing quietly, while her boss groveled at my side.

"See this?" I whispered, shining my light into the darkness below the step. "It's a trap door." I swung the riser back and forth for emphasis. "Someone or something reached out of there and grabbed my foot."

The manager's eyes widened, his panicked stare a mix of dismay, denial, and disbelief. While the girl held her hand over her mouth, I picked up her discarded flashlight and wedged it carefully in the menacing aperture.

"Now we'll *all* go to your office."

After flashing my rent-a-cop badge (too quickly for the startled couple to read) I told them in no uncertain terms how it was going to be. My moment had arrived. All doubt had been banished in an instant and neither Mr. Peevy nor his terrified employee was going to keep me from discovering who or what lurked under that step. The fidgeting manager's admission that scores of patrons fell in that ill-fated aisle brought joy to my soul.

"You understand," I said sternly, rising to leave, "that you are not to speak of this to anyone. The publicity—not to mention the lawsuits—would destroy you."

They nodded solemnly.

"You will avoid any irregular action near that step," I added. "Pretend nothing ever happened, and call me at this number the next time someone falls."

I think Mr. Peevy would have signed over his house at that moment, but fortunately for him, that was not necessary to my plan. Before leaving, I slipped back into the theater to retrieve the girl's flashlight.

It was gone.

My "night" boss at Tower Security and Private Investigation is Frank Towers—an ex-green beret and retired Los Angeles police detective. I never knew him in Nam, but his reputation was legendary. Now a highly successful entrepreneur, he gives me fifteen to twenty hours a week guarding used car lots and downtown construction sites. It was his penchant for high-tech surveillance equipment that led me straight to his office.

"This is a GAPP," he said beaming over a detailed color photo. "Geometrical Arithmetic Parallel Processor. Infra-red sensors detect various degrees of heat and the processor creates a detailed bit map of the subject—hundreds of thousands of pixels—a clear picture of an object in total darkness! I don't have one, of course, but I might be able to arrange for a demo unit to stop here in town."

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Most of what he said flew right over my head, but that didn't matter; Frank knew enough for both of us. I was pleased and surprised at how easily he took to the idea that someone or something was hiding right under our noses.

"Kind of like the V.C., eh, Bud?" he had laughed.

My intention to photograph, maybe even capture, one of the enigmatic pranksters appealed to Frank's sense of adventure, and he knew just what equipment I would need to get the job done. His connections at Morton Manufacturing & Aerospace didn't hurt either.

Later that night, Stanley Potts was clearly surprised to see me.

"Yes," I laughed, "the crazy man is back."

The young supervisor's face reddened, but he was quick to place himself at my service. (It is seldom wise not to humor a mad man.) He was surprised again when I asked him if he would remove the same step riser from the same bus. Nevertheless, Stanley motioned me to the back of the garage, grabbing a long sturdy screwdriver on the way. I reached into the same drawer of the tall red tool box, pulled out a small Phillip's head, and followed him to "my" bus.

"You've seen it all before," he shrugged.

"Maybe."

Moments later, the young man lifted the dirty riser out of the stairwell and carried it to a workbench against the wall.

"Good," I handed him the smaller screwdriver. "Now, take off the little plate."

When the first screw did not budge, Stanley bore heavily into the second —then the third, forth, and fifth. None of them inclined toward backing out.

"I'll get some penetrating oil," he said.

I shook my head.

"An impact wrench . . . ?" He was searching my face, asking not telling.

"I think not. Let's turn it over."

He obeyed immediately. Things were looking irregular in his world and I was loving it.

"What we need is a key, I think, (I was still smiling) but maybe this will do."

I slipped the point of my pocket knife along the barely visible outline on the back of the suspicious riser until it caught against something hard. The tiny catch released suddenly, and the small "inspection plate" flipped neatly inward, swinging up on invisible spring hinges. Stanley wasn't smiling this time.

"Now, Stanley, my friend," I said, patting him on the back, "can you handle an arc-welder?"

He nodded slowly.

"Good." I ushered him off to the side and pulled out my notebook and pen. "But let's try and keep this to ourselves, OK?"

Mr. Peevy called sooner than I had hoped, but I was ready. I dialed the number Frank had given me, and Mr. H. Russell Black, of Morton Manufacturing & Aerospace in Denver assured me his team would fly in the following morning.

"This better be for real, Mr. Weller," he said. "I'd do just about anything for Captain Towers, but if there's nothing

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legit to shoot out there, my butt will end up in a sling. I feel like a summer camper hunting snipes!"

I knew the feeling well.

Frank and I met at the airport in time to watch Morton's sleek white turboprop settle in on a back runway.

"It's a Beech Starship," Frank said with admiration. "Pretty, isn't she? It's a high-tech composite design by Rutan. There are only four of them flying; this is the first full-size prototype."

We drove Russ Black, his six-man crew, and their paraphernalia to the theater. Seeing the men in clean white jumpsuits carrying reinforced, acronym covered aluminum suitcases further unnerved Mr. Peevy. He fumbled with the front door keys, sweat beading on his forehead. For a moment or two I thought curiosity would overcome fear as he fussed and fidgeted, trying to be a part of the hustle and bustle overtaking the right aisle of his theater, but Mr. Peevy's frail metabolism was not up to the excitement of it all and he retreated to the projectionist's booth. From time to time, he appeared in the window, wringing his hands and looking at his watch.

I recognized the "GAPP" designation on two of Russ' silver attache cases, but kept Frank busy explaining "TADS," "PNVS," "LANTIRN," and, of course, "FLIR."

"It all incorporates FLIR," he said matter-of-factly. "Forward Looking Infra-Red is the key."

While Russ set up a "command center" behind the movie screen, Frank showed off his expertise.

"This is the Target Acquisition Designation Sight, TADS," he said. Then, pointing to a slowly rotating turret at the edge of the stage curtains, "It's linked up to that Pilot Night Vision Sensor, PNVS. They'll be using these to see what's going on in the theatre.

"That's the Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infra-Red system for Night . . . LANTIRN." Frank pointed across the aisle. "There are usually two of those pods, but since we're not planning to fly this theater, the targeting unit is all we need. This little beauty will show us what's going on *under* the theater."

Frank smiled like a kid in a candy store.

I was properly impressed, but nagging doubts crept over me even as Frank and Russell's enthusiasm grew. They obviously loved showing off the high-tech hardware, but if my *something* turned out to be a figment of a mid-life crisis-crazed brain, these men were not going to be amused. The temptation to start banging on the suspect step riser (just to be sure it really did open) was almost irresistible, but Mr. Peevy saved me by edging his way down the aisle to inform us—almost frantically—that it was time to open the theater for the first matinee.

"What's that?" I asked Frank as we headed for the stage. "It looks like a camera."

"Nothing gets by you," he laughed. "Usually this stuff's hooked up to lasers, rockets, and Hellfire missiles, but Russ thought that might unnerve the general viewing public . . . not to mention your friend, Peevy.

"The camera's just a little icing; if

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that riser opens . . . smile! Regardless, the GAPP will record and maintain a complete magnetic record of anything that shows up under there. *Something* better show up, Bud. You know what I mean?"

"Yea, I know."

Yellow ribbons kept the straggling afternoon movie goers away from the equipment, and as the slides hawking local Chiropractors, Chinese restaurants, and future attractions clicked through their steady cycle, we watched the patrons settle in. Even in the dim light, each individual was clearly visible. Russ watched me stare dumbfoundedly at the monitor and laughed.

"Here," he said, "try this."

He handed me a fighter pilot's helmet which was tethered to the equipment on the table before us. The view inside the visor shifted automatically with any movement of my head—as if it were hooked to my own optic nerve.

"Grief and conscience," I whispered. "This is incredible."

"Really?" Russ Black chuckled. "How about this?"

He flipped a switch and the theatre in my helmet exploded into a dazzling display of swirling, multi-colored lights. The people turned into brightly painted ghosts, and while Russ explained the relationship between the various colors and the temperatures they represented, I just watched the psychedelic living mural with disbelief.

"I'm switching back," he said. "Look at the projection booth."

I blinked at the sudden return to normal images and saw the young projectionist's head and shoulders move back and forth across the small window. Russ punched a series of keys and the scene rushed at me as the magnification increased.

"Now," he said, flicking the infrared switch once again. "Do you still think we can't photograph your mysterious friend?"

The boy in the booth was suddenly a full-sized ghost, colored in swirling tattoos of heat. The wall was gone.

The matinee started without incident. The LANTIRN targeting monitor remained unchanged, showing what Russ and Frank said were ordinary electric cables beneath the floor. While I stared at the faintly glowing lines, praying that my *something* would appear, the others surveyed the audience with the TADS/PNVS, commenting quietly on various young female patrons. "Excellent heat distribution pattern," was, I think, intended as a complimentary observation.

After an hour I had to look away from the shimmering monitor. My eyes hurt and my spirits sagged. Several of the others left for an early dinner break, while Frank brought out a deck of cards and dealt a hand of five card stud to those of us who remained.

"Five dollars," Russ whispered, raising the helmet visor part way up.

"Fold," I said, still rubbing my eyes.

"I'm in," said the one they called "Butch."

"Bingo!" hissed the quiet black man with horn-rim glasses. "Bogey at twelve o'clock!"

Everyone turned to my monitor at once. Russ Black slammed down his visor and started punching keys on the blue-gray console.

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"Son-of-a-gun, Frank . . . Weller's really got something!"

"Nice going, Bud," Frank said, slapping me without taking his eyes off the screen. "What is it?"

Russ shook his head and kept typing. I just stared with my mouth open.

"Humanoid," whispered the black man, "but it's definitely *not* human. It's scrunched over, but I make it almost four foot."

"Body temperature, 86 degrees, give or take," said Butch. "Pulse rate, 42 beats per minute."

"It's carrying a pretty sophisticated piece of electronic hardware," Russ said. "Maybe a weapon . . . probably a computer."

"What's the other thing?" Frank asked quietly, pulling a 9mm automatic from a holster at his back and setting it on the table.

None of the electronics wizards answered, but somehow I knew. "It's a lunch box."

The creature—scrunching still further—moved gracefully into the tight space directly behind the trap door, set the lunch box aside, and punched a series of deliberate key strokes into its hand-held electronic gadget. This task accomplished, it put the unidentified unit down, picked up a nearby flashlight, withdrew what appeared to be a paperback from somewhere on its person, crossed its legs, and began to read.

"If that don't beat all," Frank whispered. "He's just gonna sit there and enjoy a book!"

It got real quiet at the make-shift command table and everybody just stared at my monitor until Russell Black stopped typing and flipped up his visor. Electronic lines ran left to right across the GAPP monitor, slowly filling the screen with an amazingly detailed picture of our friend.

"There he is," Russ said. "If I had a decent computer graphics system along I could give him to you in 3-D, but you get the idea."

There was no way to be sure it was a "he," but the farmer-type coveralls reinforced the guess. It had thick hair on its head—either naturally short, or deliberately buzz-cut—and arms that were both long and muscularly defined. On the bulbous nose, rested a delicate pair of wire-rim glasses. "He" seemed to be smiling. . . . it must have been a good book.

"What are you going to call it?" Frank asked me. I just shrugged, continuing to stare.

"I've got it," laughed Russ. He started typing again and bright yellow block letters appeared on the bit map photograph.

B.U.S.T.R.
(Bud's Unidentified Sub-Terranean Rowdy)

"Buster," I whispered, trying it on for size.

"It works for me," Frank chuckled. "Now what?"

"Wait and see if he gets rowdy," whispered Butch.

We didn't have long to wait. The four other Morton team members came back just as the closing credits ran up the movie screen and the theater patrons started up the aisles. The men in white froze when they saw the LANTIRN monitor and the GAPP picture.

"So there *is* something after all," hissed the short one under his breath.

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"And you owe me a hundred bucks, Mickey," said another, his eyes glued to the screen.

"Heads up!" said the black man. "Here we go. . . ."

"Buster" set down his book, put his left hand up to the step riser, and held his right hand poised for action.

"Easy," whispered Frank.

"Steady," said the black man.

"Pulse rate, 48," Butch announced quietly.

It was really too fast to see, but the permanent record on magnetic tape played it back something like this:

1) Buster flips open trap door.
2) Camera flashes. Buster trips preppy kid.
3) Buster slams door. Kid falls on face.
4) Buster rubs his eyes. Kid rubs his knees.
5) Buster opens door to see what happened. Camera flashes twice more.

(Somewhere about here, Butch announced Buster's pulse rate is nearing 60.)

6) Buster slams door again, fumbles blindly for his electronic device.

(This is where Frank picked up the 9mm. Russell motions him to hold.)

7) Buster keys the device frantically before gathering up his belongings to leave.
8) Buster starts to withdraw, pauses, peeks out riser one more time.
9) Camera flashes. Buster disappears.

At this point, Mr. Peevy (who was watching from the shadows behind us) started babbling "Oh help us! Oh help us!" He wrung his hands, looking like he might faint at any moment. When I finally got him calmed down sufficiently, he gave me the urgent phone message which had driven him from the relative safety of his office.

"A Mr. Potts," he whined unsteadily, "said I must tell you that he's 'got one.' He says you should hurry. Oh help us!"

I eased the trembling manager into a chair and ran out the emergency exit with Frank Towers on my heels.

"My car," Frank yelled, pointing at the steel-gray Chrysler sedan.

It was faster than my wife's station wagon, so I got in while Frank retrieved a red light from under the seat, placed it on the roof, and plugged it in the cigarette lighter. Frank grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Stanley Potts was frantic. He rushed out to meet us, pulling on my sleeve, dragging me toward the garage while Frank rummaged around in the trunk of the car.

"It's waking up again, Mr. Weller," he said with considerable urgency. "You'd better think of something *fast*."

Stanley pointed to the tool room door. It lay askew, the top hinge ripped in half, the bottom hinge framed in splintered wood.

"He . . . it . . . tore that door like it was a paper towel," the shaky Metro shop supervisor exclaimed, "and it was still groggy from the ether."

"So our little trap worked," I said.

"Oh, he came in curled up like a puppy in the rebar basket you had me build on the bus frame," Stanley said, "but when he started coming to . . . Gosh, but he's strong."

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Buster II was sitting unsteadily in the shop's tire cage—a precautionary enclosure built of three-inch tubular steel where newly repaired bus tires were inflated. His eyes blinked slowly. He was smaller than Buster I, without glasses and coveralls (He wore faded jeans and red suspenders.), but he looked just as powerful. The cage was wrapped in heavy tow chains and steel cable, but the nervous look on Stanley's face indicated that he had little faith in the make-shift jail.

"That was the last can of ether spray," Stanley said. "Oh, this is Lester Rourke."

Lester was about six-three, 280 pounds, and armed with a four foot steel tire tool. He nodded when I said "hello," but didn't take his eyes off Buster.

"What is it," he asked warily, "a gremlin?"

"I don't know," I said. "We're just calling him 'Buster' for now."

Before any of us knew how it happened, Buster II was out of the cage and heading for the back door. Lester swung hard with the tire iron and I shouted vainly for him to stop. It didn't matter. The creature caught the tool easily in one hand, disarmed the big mechanic, sent him sprawling across the floor, and moved on.

"I'll get him," Frank hollered, coming in the front doorway. He pumped hard on a 12 gauge riot gun and lowered it at the fleeing enigma.

"No!" I screamed, diving at Buster's legs.

The blast of buckshot whistled over our heads as we toppled into a nearby tool chest, sending screwdrivers and loose sockets bouncing across the concrete floor. I knew I couldn't hold Buster long, but I didn't want him killed either.

"Put that thing away, Frank!" I realized suddenly that Buster wasn't struggling. "If you've hurt him I'll . . . "

"Thanks, but I'm fine. You saved my life; I believe I'm seriously in your debt."

Buster II stood, extended his powerful grip, and pulled me to my feet. After brushing himself off, he shrugged and threw up his hands.

"I guess we didn't take you seriously enough, Bud." He tried to smile. "Boy, that stuff gave me a headache. Mr. Potts? Could I trouble you for a cup of coffee?"

Everyone stared in disbelief. We were either all having the same dream, or Buster II was speaking perfect English.

"By the way, my name isn't Buster—it's Roosevelt. I *was* a grade six, due for promotion next month, but I think it's safe to say that's probably out of the question at this point."

I motioned Stanley toward the coffee machine and shook my head when Lester reached for the tire tool. Frank looked like he was alone in a rice paddy, knees bent slightly, gripping the shotgun hard and watching Roosevelt closely.

"Gremlins are mythological creatures," Roosevelt said to Lester, as if the big man should have known better. "You know, fairy tales, children's stories and such? *I* am a Troll."

Lester looked pale and Stanley trembled, but managed to hand the styrofoam cup to Roosevelt before collapsing

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on the first step of a nearby bus. The "troll" hopped up on the work bench, crossed his legs, and sipped his coffee.

"Thank you," he said, taking another careful drink and rubbing his eyes. "I'd better check in. May I have my *terminal*?"

"Terminal?" I said. "You mean that computer thing?" I looked at Stanley and he pointed at the tool chest.

"I put it in the second drawer," he said.

I looked the terminal over closely before handing it to Roosevelt. It seemed harmless enough, but what would I know? Frank eased forward slowly.

"We 'borrowed' the technology from several places," the troll admitted. "Mostly from Federal Express and the cellular phone companies."

After another pull on the coffee, he punched in a series of keystrokes, watched the small display, and started to laugh. The laughter was both pleasant and mischievous.

"Poor old Farley," he chuckled, looking up at me. "What ever did you do to him?"

"Who?"

"Farley's the old troll who took over for the kid you popped at the State Avenue Theater."

"Oh."

"You nearly broke the little guy's nose," Roosevelt laughed. "But Farley . . . he's one cagey old troll. How'd you get him so shook? He's apparently back at Central in something of a tizzy. Of course, my news won't help."

I told him—as best I could—about the infra-red equipment and the pictures.

"Well, that explains it. You've had a busy day, Mr. Weller," Roosevelt chuckled. "The Boss may even want to see you. Yes . . . wait. Here come my instructions."

There wasn't enough time to build many expectations about having an audience with "the Boss," but it wouldn't have mattered. After a hasty conference with Frank (He was most insistent that we take immediate "precautions" and called Russ Black straight away.) and everyone's assurance that we would not be followed, I prepared to leave — blindfolded—with Roosevelt.

"Wait," Frank called out. "You'll want to take some notes. . . . I've still got your good pen."

I felt him clip something to the pocket of my flannel shirt and pat me on the shoulder.

"Have fun," he said soberly, and we were on our way. In all the excitement, I couldn't even remember having a pen, let alone giving it to Frank.

The long winding journey—often managed on hands and knees—took nearly an hour, but nothing could have prepared me for Troll Central. It looked like a giant telephone sales office where dozens of male and female trolls wearing headsets and manning computer consoles kept in constant contact with their fellows in "the field." They were dressed more uniformly than Roosevelt and Farley, in shirts and slacks that looked distinctly like Army green. A few supervisor types wandered about in white lab coats. All the outfits were well tailored and pressed, with varying insignia on the right breast pocket flaps. Some of the females had slightly longer

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hair, worn straight up or held back with colorful bandannas. Otherwise, only the angle of insignia distinguished genders. Despite evidence of a normally well-disciplined work force, my presence obviously unsettled the evening's regime.

"This is new ground for everyone," Roosevelt whispered, guiding me toward a spiral stairway in the center of the room. The round glass office overhead was evidently where "the Boss" waited to welcome me. I wasn't expecting a red carpet.

"I apologize for insisting that Roosevelt bring you here blindfolded, Mr. Weller, but you have seriously compromised us already. Won't you sit down?"

I sat gladly. Standing with my head tilted sideways against the low ceiling, even for the duration of Roosevelt's brief oral report, had given me a crick. The Boss was a heavyset executive-type troll, balding and generally out of shape. It seemed that troll execs were not yet into racquetball.

"We have always known discovery was inevitable. : . . eventually," the Boss went on, "but until this evening, we gave *your* efforts little or no concern; well, except for the bonus points that is. Others have tried, you may be sure. One young woman even managed a photograph, but that was New York City. You know how it is there. But you, Mr. Weller—"

"Please, call me Bud."

"Bud. We have grossly underestimated you. Morton Manufacturing & Aerospace technology . . . " He mumbled to himself. "Who'd have thought. Our Denver and Orlando divisions have been trying to 'borrow' some of that FLIR technology for over a year. . . .

"Anyway," he went on, "something will have to be done now—severe steps, if you will."

"I see," I said, not really seeing at all.

"Trolls have a rather bad reputation I'm afraid—one we have spent centuries trying to overcome. While our ancestors never *really* hid under bridges waiting to eat unwary passersby (*most* of them anyway) mischief is a part of our nature. Only through intensive occupational training and a well-organized, carefully controlled program of mischief, have we been able to move our people slowly toward a more productive future. A future which might well include integration into the human culture . . . 'upstairs,' as we say.

"In the meantime, we have been working toward a major objective change for several years, Mr. Wel—Bud— actually our own aerospace technicians have made some outstanding discoveries—but your actions this evening will necessitate a severe acceleration in our timetable. We could close down here in a matter of hours, but the destabilization factor will be high.

"Because of this, and other considerations," the Boss said without expression, "it will be necessary to relieve your friends of the pictures you have so cleverly taken, and put all of you out of circulation for a time."

Roosevelt and I came out of our seats in unison. I hit my head.

"You can't—" I said.

"Boss!" Roosevelt exclaimed, cutting me off. "You said if I brought him

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you would negotiate. If you do this now . . . ''

''It is already being done.''

Suddenly, things went haywire at Troll Central. First, hectic computer messages began coming in, making it immediately clear that whatever plan the Boss had set in motion wasn't working out as he had expected. Somehow, the squad he had sent to the theater were themselves ambushed and three of them were being held at gunpoint.

In the midst of that confusion, a prolonged burst of automatic weapons fire, accompanied by the shuttering boom and the blinding flash of a concussion grenade, sent trolls diving for cover. While every mother's troll lay sprawled on the floor, I watched a hissing smoke grenade roll through the main doors and quickly obscure the central aisle of the workroom. Long before the circulation system caught up and the smoke lessened in the outer room, Frank Towers stood beside me in the office, straddling the Boss's prone body with his 12 gauge riot gun in one hand, jammed firmly into the fat troll's head, and a MAC 11 machine gun in the other hand, carefully covering the smokey room below.

''Sorry to drop in unexpected and all,'' Frank said, his eyes scanning every inch of the complex, ''but it seems that was *my* pen after all . . . the one with the micro transmitter in it.''

''For the love of Pete, you could have killed somebody, Frank!'' I complained.

''I can't figure it,'' he said, ignoring me. ''They don't seem to have any weapons. Russ says the ones who raided the theater were unarmed as well. Still, it's a good thing the Morton boys were ready; these buggers are strong.''

''May I get up now?'' It was the Boss.

''Sure,'' Frank said, lifting the shotgun carefully, ''but don't try anything funny. Sit there where I can see you. You too,'' he said to Roosevelt.

''We have *never* seen the need for weapons of any sort,'' the Boss remarked with distaste. ''But I'm afraid we're somewhat used to having things our way. It appears now, that we will need to get over that self-indulgence rather quickly.''

''I think that means he's *really* willing to negotiate now,'' Roosevelt said with a wink. ''Being practical has always been one of his strengths.''

Roosevelt's boss just scowled.

''I wouldn't say he's in much of a position to negotiate anything,'' Frank smiled. ''It's your game, Bud. What do we do with them?''

''Well, I sure don't want you to shoot anybody.'' I turned back to the Boss. ''What do you say now?''

''What you want is a story,'' he replied smoothly. ''Am I right?''

''That's right.'' Now we were getting somewhere.

''I can arrange for a meeting of our National Council within the hour. I will propose that you be given any information you request on our history and our past activities—interviews, photos, and any other verification you require. In exchange, you will delay further exposure for whatever reasonable period the Council can agree upon. Does this compromise interest you?''

''Very much.''

''Good. But you understand that we

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will need to assure the . . ..ah . . . discretion of your friends.''

''Oh.''

''Oh, indeed. Once you return safely, they will be anxious to share their documentation with others. That will adversely affect both our transition and your . . . 'scoop,' I believe it is called in journalistic circles.''

''My scoop . . . yes. Why do I have the feeling that you already have some suggestion along those lines?''

The ''Boss'' smiled with undisguised satisfaction.

A year later the world is still reeling—reactions varying widely—but the Step Trolls's, ''downstairs'' culture has turned a significant corner in its development. Roosevelt tells me there are still more than a few freelance ''Step'' Trolls, tripping humans on their own time, but for the most part, everyone has made the adjustment. Some, like Roosevelt, are having a tougher time than others.

''I just don't like it,'' he told me. ''Makes me sick to my stomach.''

''You'll get over it,'' I said.

''Maybe, but I liked theaters and city buses.''

''Nothing lasts forever. Anyway, the Boss says Trolls have been testing successfully for years. You're decades ahead of us. Boy, I love it, all those 'UFO' sightings . . . ''

''It's one thing to send those crazy Mountain Trolls screaming around the sky,'' Roosevelt waved in dismay, ''but why me?''

'' 'To boldly go . . . ' ''

''Cut it out, Bud. I could get killed.''

''Yes, but you could also become rich and famous—a national hero, upstairs and down.''

''Would you go?''

''I've seen the cockpit. . . . too small.''

''That's easy. Look, you're responsible for all this.''

''Thank you.''

''I should have known the city wouldn't install 'air freshener' under their bus steps,'' Roosevelt grumbled.

''Nice touch, eh?''

''Yea, but for a while there, we got big bonus points for you. You were almost as much fun as Gerald Ford!''

''Yes, my friend, but I won the game.''

''Great. I'm going to die in outer space and you're patting yourself on the back, getting rich on your book royalties.''

''Ah, Roosevelt. Did I ever tell you about life?''

''Tell me about what?''

''It's like this: success and failure are on opposite sides of a long wall of stones. . . . '' ■

●A stepping-stone can be a stumbling block if we don't see it until after we have tripped over it.

Cullen Hightower

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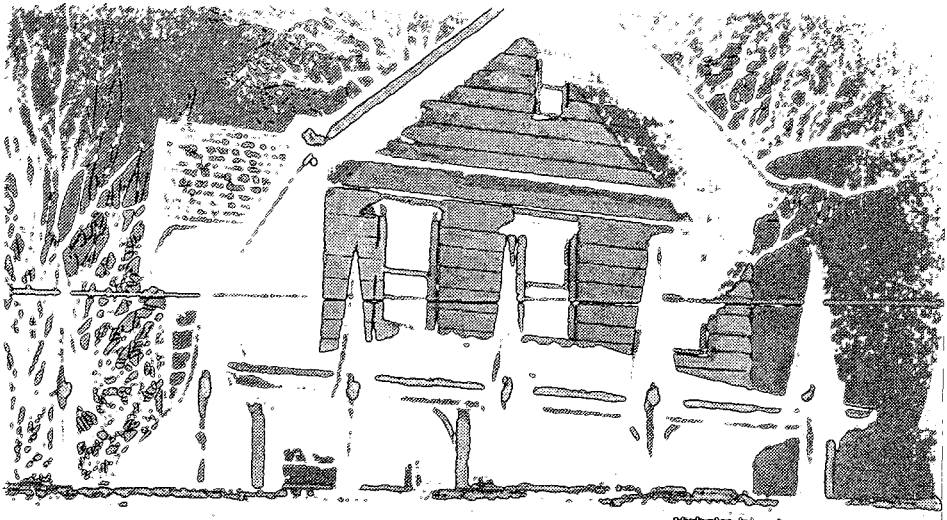

Nicholas Jainschigg

SOCIAL CONTRACT

W. T. Quick

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The keening oboe wail of the alarm almost took off the top of Carver's head.

"*Death zone,*" Kippie's brass voice brayed. "*Death zone!*"

Carver slammed on the brakes, felt the nose of the car dive and begin to slide. He fought the wheel until the vehicle skidded to a stop, then stared at the sign on the left side of the road, not ten feet in front of him.

Welcome to Marysville.
Established 1906.
Population 2112.

Not again, he thought. *Oh, please God, not again.* But he knew that God hadn't been in his corner for a long time.

Carefully, his fingers shaking, he wiped sudden beads of sweat from his forehead. Then he waited for his heart to stop doing a scary little hip-hop inside his chest. After a while he felt calm enough to push the button and roll down the window. All the carefully chilled air inside the car rushed out; he smelled cut hay.

He wrinkled his nose with pleasure. The damp, dry-green odor of it was like a dimly remembered boyhood benediction. He'd grown up in country like this. Something glinting and golden, barely visible, buzzed up close to his left ear. Some kind of gnat. A big sycamore tree overhanging the sign rustled softly in the breeze. The sun beat down with great quietness. Beyond the sign, the road rose gently, and at the top of the rise he saw a shingled barn roof, silver-black with age.

He shook his head. The whine of the gnat came and went. "Death zone?" he said finally. "Are you kidding?"

He sighed and rolled his big shoulders, working to get the kinks out of them. Then he opened the door and stepped onto the pavement. The wind caught at his long, graying hair, whipping it in his face. A sharp pain knifed at the base of his spine and he grimaced, squinting faded blue eyes against the sun. He reached into the car, pulled Kippie from its housing on the dashboard, and slung its pack over his shoulder by the strap.

I don't look like a farmer, he thought. That could be dangerous. He sighed again, felt the heat of the asphalt working its way through the soles of his shoes, and began to look around for the Snitch. There had to be one somewhere near. It was the law.

He found the low concrete construction on the other side of the road, tipped slightly where a drainage ditch had washed part of the bank away beneath it. He picked his way through goldenrod and milkweed, and felt tiny burrs scratch at the cuffs of his pants. The Snitch itself looked serviceable enough, protected by its cement sheath; he'd worried that erosion might have damaged it somehow. He smiled at the cheerful blue Midwest Ameritech logo on the shiny plastic housing.

Kippie remained silent. A flight of birds—swallows?—rushed by overhead, flapping briskly. He began to hear the low, dry whir of crickets.

Normally Carver hardly noticed the weight, but today Kippie felt especially heavy. He glanced around one more time, then reached into the pack and withdrew a length of fiber-optic cable. At its tip was a short, shiny jack. He plugged this into the facing of the kiosk.

Immediately a red bulb winked; after

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a moment, it settled into a steady glow. He stared at the crimson dot, eyes slitted, until it seemed to grow and fill all of his vision. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the red had turned to green. Carefully, he unplugged the cable and stowed it in the pack. Then he climbed back up to the road, brushing a few errant stickems from his trousers.

He squinched his eyes at the sky and estimated a little after four in the afternoon. Then he checked his nailtale and grinned. Quarter after. Right on the button.

"Now, we'll see," he said to nobody in particular, as he maneuvered his short, thick body under the wheel. He rolled up his window and waited until the heated edge was off the air. He punched a button on his door and heard the magbolts slide shut with a satisfying *chunk*.

"What's this about a death zone?" he said.

It looked like any other small Indiana town in the northern lake country. White clapboard houses, their facades breaking onto broad, friendly porches, filled well-proportioned lots on either side of wide, oak-shaded streets. Here and there he saw vegetable gardens. A bright-tongued collie woofed lazily at him as he cruised slowly past. The vivid orange flash of a ripe pumpkin caught his eye. Then a Burger King on one corner, a Shell-GE station on the next, and finally, in the center of town, the imposing doric columns of the First National Bank of Windsor County.

Carver pulled his compact Yugo-Hyundai coupe into one of the angled slots fronting on the big granite building and turned off the engine. Then he sat without moving for almost five minutes. A curious passerby might have noticed that his lips twitched regularly, but nobody seemed to be curious. Even harder to see was the thin strand of opti-fiber, no thicker than a ten-pound test fishing line, which ran from the coffee-can sized housing on the car's dashboard to the tiny plug just beneath Carver's right ear.

"OK," he subvocalized—bone induction carried his words to Kippie's housing—"just give me a quick rundown. How many crimes require capital punishment?"

"Two hundred and thirteen," his Lawyer—sort of—replied. "Everything from kidnapping to publicly insulting a senior citizen. Which is anybody over sixty."

"How about murder?" Carver asked.

"Only if the victim is a senior," Kippie said. "If the murderer is elderly and the victim is young, it's a misdemeanor."

Carver nodded slowly. "Who would have thought?" he said. His stomach heaved something greasy and bitter into his throat. "There's a gang of Gerries hidden away out here." He glanced up and saw an old geezer in faded denim overalls leaning idly against the farthest pillar of the bank. This rheumy-eyed ancient wasn't even looking at him. He was staring blankly at the courthouse square across the street, his jaws moving slowly on a cud of tobacco. Carver shivered suddenly. I'm not afraid, he told himself.

Fear or hate, came the reply. What's the difference?

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"It's none of our business," Kippie told him. "You're due in Indianapolis tomorrow."

The sun pounded on the windshield of the car. Carver felt as if he was being slowly charbroiled. He fished a wadded handkerchief out of the glovebox and mopped his forehead.

"It's a consulting thing," he said. "Not important. Not like this."

"It's your job," Kippie replied. Its voice had taken on a slightly rougher, exasperated tone. "But if this *is* so damn important, call it in and get a full team down here. The legal pattern fits . . . but even so, it's nothing for us to get mixed up in by ourselves."

"I've got to check it out, Kippie. There's nothing to call in except the pattern. They might be gone, and the pattern not decayed yet. Or just one left. Or a whole crew of them." Carver felt his back growing sticky against the plastic seat. He leaned forward. His shirt pulled loose with a soggy, tearing sound.

"You know what it means. If we got a full-blown pack of Gerries here, you know how they operate. They chop people up for organs. Anything they need. They have the surgical techniques, the equipment, the will to do it. They buy a town like this in exchange for life. That's what they pay with, that's their currency—more years. And a lot of people are willing to pay *anything* for that. And I will do *anything* to stop them." The horrid vision of Maddie, his dead wife, her broken body crumpled on a dark Chicago street, flashed across his memory and he stopped, his hands shaking. He counted to ten. "Whatever," he said. "I planned to stop for the night anyway. Might as well be here."

He glanced at the housing. Kippie was more than just a Lawyer. Poured matrix brain and the best AI programs the Group had been able to buy or steal. Probably had already picked up the lie. The real lie, too.

"Might as well be the next miserable village down the road, too," Kippie replied. "But I know you. It won't be." The little machine paused. When it spoke again, its voice was calm. "OK. For an overnight stay, and the requisite poking around, I read a point nine two survival probability. Arrest probability is high—around sixty percent. Convictions are something else. You know the pattern. *Everybody* gets convicted."

Carver nodded. "I'll have to avoid getting arrested, then, won't I?"

"Uh huh. Respect your elders."

"Frigging right," Carver said.

There was a neat little Marriott Inn tucked away on the far side of Marysville, perched on a hill overlooking the banks of a river that flowed like green molasses beneath a line of ancient willows. Good catfish, maybe some sunnies, Carver thought. He fed his chip into the registration console and received a room assignment and contract in hardcopy a moment later.

The room was large and airy. Set into the far wall a long glass door looked down to the river. He checked the lock but left the door closed. Later, when the heat of the day was gone, it would be nice to sit on the patio, savor a scotch, and watch dusk settle over the river.

"This town got prohibition?" he asked.

"No," Kippie replied.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the

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large mirror over the bureau as he unpacked. Old. As usual, it startled him. He didn't think of himself as aged—in fact, was not; but the deep web of lines at the corners of his eyes, above the bridge of his nose, and fanning down around his mouth, gave the casual impression of advanced years.

He looked into the tired blue eyes of his reflection. Time wasn't the only thing that aged a face like that. He blinked. The momentary stasis passed. He shook his head and decided it wasn't a time for pity. Especially not self-pity. And the fact that much of his life was spent in sterile transient rooms like this, his one companion a cannister of etched molecules, only emphasized the precarious truce he maintained with the rest of the world.

"Did you pick up a good place to eat from the Snitch?" he asked. Often smaller towns sold advertising space on their Snitches to local businesses.

Kippie, now unplugged from the socket beneath Carver's ear, answered with his small, tinny vocoder. "This hotel has a dining room," he said. "And there's a joint called Andy's, claims to have good ribs."

"What are the odds?"

"Andy's has its own smokehouse," Kippie replied.

"That's it, then. Anything special in the way of law?"

"Don't spit," Kippie said.

"Inside or out?"

"Either."

"Yeah?"

"Mandatory kidney donation," Kippie told him.

"Oh," Carver said. "I wonder which of the old monsters has a thing about that?"

"Whichever one needs a kidney," Kippie replied. "The law's only three weeks old."

He decided to walk. Kippie said the restaurant was just a few blocks away. As he swung easily along the late afternoon streets, he marveled at how much, and how little, the world had altered in his lifetime. He'd grown up expecting to die in some god-forgotten dirty little jungle war somewhere, or perhaps more cleanly in the inevitable nuclear holocaust, when everything had changed. The Russian Collapse had taken the world by surprise; everybody, that is, except whoever had loosed the Red Virus—and whoever that was never owned up. The Sovs themselves, intelligence gospel said. It had been called a fortunate accident, but that was before the United States began to fall apart, its consensual glue dissolved by the exigencies of peace and democracy, the information society, and the extra trillion or so each year from shrunken defense budgets.

Do-it-yourself justice. The politicians put a Lawyer in every pot, so fate stuck a joker in every deck.

Am I laughing yet? Carver wondered, remembering the old wheeze. He really wanted to kill somebody. In this town, he would probably get the chance. The thought made him happy.

He glanced up at a tall maple tree and smiled at the fiery red canopy. Fall was in the air. He heard the pup-pup concrete slap of a dribbled basketball and the shouts of three teenaged boys jumping at a garage-door hoop across the

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street. Up the block flickered a faded orange neon sign. And 's, it blinked, then steadied: Andy's.

The dark, vinegar-sugar odor of barbecue began to tickle his nose, and he grinned widely, his mouth suddenly wet. It had been a long time since he'd tasted honest country cooking, and he found himself walking faster.

A shabby tin pushbar across the screen door of the restaurant proclaimed in washed-out white lettering that Coke was It. The cool wash of meat-scented air beckoned him inside. As the screen door whapped shut behind him, a tiny bell jingled.

Inside the place it was dim and narrow. He made out a row of scarred Formica tables down the wall to his right. On the left, an old wooden display case served as a stand for a glittering new dataremote. Beyond this cashier station was a low counter with a pie rack at the far end. The counter faced a waist-high opening into the kitchen. Carver rubbed his big hands together, smiled, and sat down at the counter.

"Anybody home?" he called.

"Hang on one minute," a disembodied voice replied from somewhere in back. "This sauce is just about ready." It was a woman's voice, but deep and crusted with hoarse edges.

Carver nodded to himself and inspected the pie rack. He wondered if that was actually sweet potato pie he saw on the top shelf. The barbecue odor redoubled, and he knew he was going to order a lot more than he could eat.

Footsteps pattered softly. A door creaked in the back of the restaurant and then she was there.

"Sorry," she said. "Good sauce won't wait, and mine's the best." She stopped for a moment and stared at him. "Hey, mister, what's the matter with you?" She was staring at his features intently, and he understood what she saw there. He knew that if she pulled out a gun, stuck it in his face, and repeated the question, he would still remain as paralyzed as a popsicle on a stick.

Every time—there had been many—he found himself looking down a telescopic sight, the same thing happened. It was the hideously intense concentration demanded by death. He called it freeze-framing. He always threw up afterwards.

She wore new dark blue Levi jeans and a trim yellow blouse with a frilly collar. A blue and white checkered apron was tied around her slender waist. She'd pulled her hair, dusty gold and gray, straight back from a face that was all clean angles, faint lines, a dappling of shadow beneath wide green eyes. Her nose was large and slightly humped, but that was perfect too.

"You OK?" she said.

After one stretched moment he decided he was going to be able to—*had* to be able to—handle it. He licked his lips and said, "Sorry. I'm fine. It was just a surprise, is all."

"Surprise?" Her stare narrowed slightly, and he saw a fine web of wrinkles jump into sharp relief at the corners of her eyes.

"Yes. You reminded me of . . . someone. Somebody I knew. Once."

"Oh." She smiled then, and Carver thought his heart would break. "Well, I hope you liked them. That someone, I mean."

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He nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak.

She put her fists—her knuckles were large and red—on her hips and said, "I got some brand new sauce, or a dab of the old left. I hope you like spicy. Got some good pig ribs, or if you want, hot links. And chicken, of course."

"Can I get a little of everything?" he said. To him it seemed the words came out like mush, slow and stuck together so she had to notice, but she just grinned at him.

"Combo plate? Coming right up—and fresh cornbread, too."

Hell and cornbread, he thought helplessly. "That'd be great," he said.

"Well?" she said.

He stared at the cracked oval plate. To his amazement, he'd eaten all the ribs, the chicken, and one of the hot links. Only the second link remained, resting in a red-brown puddle of barbecue sauce. He looked up at her.

"I'm finished," he said. He wiped his lips with a napkin and placed it carefully to the right of the plate. A warm ball of contentment filled his midriff. As he stared at her face, he realized that he really was finished, that he could talk to this woman and nothing would catch in his throat, nothing would start the tears coming.

She really wasn't Maddie. She only looked very, very much like his dead wife; but her speech patterns were different, slower and smoother, and her body language was that of another woman. Maddie was dead. This lady wasn't. Moreover, now that the initial shock had worn off, he detected an air of tension, of tightly stretched control about this lady. He wondered what could produce that kind of precarious balance in a small, sleepy town like this. Then he checked the thought—he could imagine one thing, but he didn't want to envision her with any connection to *that*. Even if another part of his mind demanded he do so.

"That's the best meal I've had in maybe ten years," he said.

Her teeth chewed lightly at the right side of her lower lip, half grin, half nervous pride. "They tell me I make pretty good barbecue," she said.

"They tell you right," he said. "What's your name? This your husband's place?" And mentally smacked himself across the mouth. Why ask her a question like that?

"This old place?" Her grin widened. "I'm Andy," she said. "Short for Andrea, you know?" She paused. "No husband," she went on. "He was in Nam Two. Long time ago."

He bobbed his head, feeling like an idiot. That perverted sequel to the original Vietnamese conflict, had, like the first, inflicted great wounds to the American conscience—so much so that it was easy to forget the survivors of those who had suffered more than simply the shattering of dreams. "My name's Carver," he told her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" But of course he did, and his voice trailed off in confusion.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, and stuck out her hand. He grabbed it as if it was a rescue line and squeezed lightly. Her fingers were warm and dry. Her grip was strong. "You just passing through?" she asked.

"Sort of. I grew up in a place like

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this," he said. "Farther downstate. Muncie. You know it at all?"

"Heard of it. Good basketball teams. Never been there, though."

"I'm on vacation, I guess. I live in Chicago now. I was just driving, heading south, nowhere in particular." He shrugged. "Things piled up. You need to get away once in a while. This is as good as anywhere. . . ."

"Chicago, huh? What would a big city type see in a dump like Marysville?"

"I don't know," he said. And he really didn't. This was all wrong, wrong. There was something terrible here, and no doubt this woman knew about it. Marysville was no more than a village—Andy might not be directly involved, but she had to know about the discreet, totally modern clinic hidden away somewhere. There was always a clinic. And everybody always knew. So she was the enemy. He forced himself to repeat the word. Enemy.

"It's got good barbecue," he said. "That's something. You know what else?" He winked at her. "It may even have good sweet potato pie. What do you think about that?"

"Huh," she said happily. "Better'n the barbecue."

He heard the screen door open, the bell jingle. She went to cut a slice of the pie. His eyes followed her; he didn't even blink when the geezer from the bank sat down at the counter and favored him with a silent, basilisk stare.

"Cut you a big piece," she said.

He forced himself to smile. "Thanks," he said. He hoped he wouldn't have to kill her. Then, to his horror, he heard himself say, "I'm not married, either."

"I didn't ask," she replied, but she smiled again.

The geriatric rescue case chuckled wetly. She turned.

"Hiyuh, Homer," she said.

Carver glanced at the man's reptile eyes and decided he wouldn't mind killing old Homer, though. Not even a little bit.

He finished his pie quickly, ignoring Homer's silent scrutiny. The old man regarded him with all the tenderness of a vulture contemplating lunch.

Andy punched his chip into the data-remote. "Thanks, bud," she said. She handed the chip back to him. "Y'know, since you're on vacation, and since you're gonna hang around here a while, and since you're not married"—a quick grin—"why don't you come by for a real home-cooked meal?"

Oh, sweet mother, he thought, I've lost my mind completely.

"Come here?" he asked.

"Nope. My house. Come for dinner tomorrow. I close this joint down once a week." Her green eyes danced merrily. "You know what they say about us country widow ladies."

He felt an answering smile smear itself across his face and found himself nodding, even as he wondered how he'd ever explain this to Kippie.

"Sure," he said. "That sounds fine."

"OK." She quickly wrote her address on a scrap of paper and handed it to him. "Here you go," she said. "About seven?"

"I'll be there," he told her.

As the bell jingled to mark his departure, he heard another voice—choked

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with thick fluids—say, "Have fun, pal."

He kept on walking.

Carver had Kippie raid the local telecom files, and found the place by ten o'clock the next morning. The big old house was on the edge of town, set well back from River Street. A shoulder-high brick wall, obviously more recent than the house, surrounded the grounds. Carver noted that wrought-iron spikes were set into the top of the wall. Each spike had a small hole in the center of the point, supporting a thin silver wire which ran the length of the wall.

He stuck his hands in his pockets and ambled slowly past the tall pair of gates which appeared to be the only entrance. Dried leaves, red and yellow and brown, crunched underfoot, yielding up a dusty wooden smell. What an absolutely peaceful place, he thought to himself, pausing for an instant in front of the gate.

Then he walked on. Peaceful villages shouldn't have big old houses surrounded by bricks and high voltage, or hump-shouldered gardeners who leaned in the direction of their shoulder holsters.

A few steps down the road was a tilted, old-fashioned mailbox. Packages only, he thought. He read the name on the reflective plate. Doctor Arland Hollister.

Good old Doc Hollister, he thought sourly. Probably everybody calls him Arly. Or Doc.

Unless, of course, he was in the process of removing their hearts.

"Nice day." It was a voice as thick and rotten as month-old tomatoes. He turned.

"Yeah," he said. "It's, uh, Homer, isn't it?"

Homer opened his mouth—Carver couldn't bring himself to call it a smile—and revealed stubs of yellow teeth decayed almost to the gumline.

"That's right," the old man said. "You like our little town?"

The light breeze shifted suddenly. Carver caught a bitter sweat smell and wondered if Homer ever bothered to wash those overalls. Or his withered body, for that matter.

"It's great," Carver said. "Just what I needed. Peace and quiet."

"Lot better than Chicago," Homer agreed. "I used to live there. Chicago, I mean."

I'll just bet you did, Carver thought. Child molester, probably. "Long time ago?" he asked. "The city's changed a lot."

"Everything changes," Homer told him. He turned and stared at the long brick wall, then back at Carver. His eyes were hooded. Carver saw faint blue veins in the pallid white of the man's eyelids.

"That it does," Carver said. Suddenly he smelled the drifting odor of burning leaves, and the clean autumn fragrance made Homer's presence almost unbearable. He allowed none of this to show on his face. He raised his shoulders and let them drop, only a tourist chatting innocently with an aged local. "That it does," he repeated, and trailed the end of the words discouragingly. "You have a good day, Homer. OK?"

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"Oh, I will," Homer said. He licked his lips. "Yes, indeed. I generally do."

Carver turned, walked, then picked up his pace. When he was a kid, skinny-dipping in the stagnant ponds along the old interstate, he'd sometimes gone down too far and gotten tangled in drifting webs of algae-slimed weeds.

Homer made him feel just like that.

As he'd expected, Kippie was appalled.

"Carver," the little machine said, "you are about due for a complete profile check. Do you have any idea why you're behaving this way?"

"I think so," Carver said.

They were on the patio. Carver had ordered a bottle of Dewars scotch from room service—unbelievably costly, but the Group was rich, and his expense reports always went unquestioned. Now, as he refilled his thick, heavy glass, he noted the scotch was close to half gone. Out over the river fireflies blinked softly; momentary yellow stars floating on the water-laden breeze. The scotch caressed the ugliness away from his brain as he watched the fireflies and mused about the curious state of his world.

Everybody carried a Lawyer. The Second Convention had restructured the judicial system in the United States, returning vast powers to local jurisdiction. It was a solution made possible only by great advances in data processing technology. Every village, city, county, and state had a complicated web of laws tailored for its individual needs. The situation had been anticipated much earlier—as the United States slowly decentralized itself in response to the onrushing information society. Practically, though, smaller jurisdictions functioned, within the loose limits imposed by the national government, as nearly autonomous legal units. It was awkward, but it relieved the pressures which had been building for a generation. For those who stayed in one place, learned the local rules, and followed them, the system was easy to live with; but for the traveler, moving from one set of regulations to others that might differ drastically, the situation became much more complicated. The answer was the Snitch and Lawyer system. Each municipality had to provide Snitches—recorded summaries of all their laws and legal records, court results, precedents, statistics, and other factors—readily available to any visitor. So when you visited the town in the next county, you found a Snitch and plugged in your Lawyer, and those ubiquitous machines told you what you could and could not do, and what the odds were of getting caught and convicted should you transgress.

Sony-Chrysler made billions selling those machines. Kippie was a Lawyer, but it was a great deal more. The legal restructuring, as with any other great change, created almost as many problems as it solved. In many cases, legal administration had come under the control of the very power structures the change was designed to defuse.

A society will always try to find answers to its own problems, and sometimes those answers aren't very social in any rigid sense.

"Do you think the Group is anti-social?" Carver asked.

Kippie made a faint, pinging electronic sound. In a human, it would have

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been a snort. "That again, Carver? Of course the Group is anti-social. Almost by definition. Any organization that operates outside the law is anti-social. So the Group claims allegiance to a higher law. Whether such a thing exists is not possible for me to judge. I'm a Lawyer, not a messiah."

"Cop out," Carver said.

"Carver, you realize this woman is distorting your judgment patterns, don't you?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, there it is. Call this nasty little mess in to Central and get out of here. The kind of mistake you're making can be fatal. This isn't a game, my friend."

Do machines have friends? Carter wondered. He sighed and lifted his drink. "Kippie, she looks like Maddie. I know she's not Maddie, but she looks like her. And there's something else. . . ."

"Maddie is dead," Kippie said flatly. "Slaughtered by a demented Gerrie on a Chicago backstreet, which is, of course, one of the reasons you are such a good agent. Hate is always a more effective motivator than idealism."

Carver considered that sourly, not at all sure he liked the profile it revealed. The scotch was making things fuzzy. That was fine. He poured another. By the time he stumbled off to bed the fireflies had disappeared. The last thing he remembered saying was, "Life sucks, Kippie. Then you die."

"Not true," Kippie had replied. "It's all probabilities. Life is never that definite."

Andy lived in the house where Carver had seen the collie. He found that out when he knocked on the rickety screen door and the big brown and white dog damn near scared him right off the front porch with a snarling crescendo that sounded like a pack of wolves circling a hamstrung moose.

"Balzac, *no!*" Andy's husky tenor laid the dog's ears down like a rug. She came to the door, wiping her hands on a dishtowel, and said, "Sorry about that. Balzac's bark is worse than his bite." As if to prove the truth of that statement, the shaggy animal placed two muddy paws on Carver's chest and drooled happily all over his shirt front.

"Get down!" Andy said, and swatted at the dog's rump with the dishrag. Obediently, Balzac dropped and began trying to crawl through Carver's legs.

"OK, all right," Carver laughed, doing an unsteady jig around ninety pounds of frenzied canine happiness. He scratched behind Balzac's ears until Andy pulled the dog away.

"In here," she called, dragging the dog through the kitchen. "I'll put him out back. He gets too excited with strangers."

Carver went into the kitchen, drawn by the smells of dinner cooking. The room was tall and square, with old-fashioned double hung windows along one wall, next to a huge pine hutch. On one shelf of the hutch he noticed a small grouping of pictures in tarnished silver frames. Most of them were of a young man in uniform, but one, much newer looking, was of a teenaged boy who bore a striking resemblance to the man. A son? But the picture was obviously recent—and the boy therein was too young. Nam Two had ended thirty years before. He shrugged. Probably a cousin

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or nephew. He walked on. The floor was covered with faded green indoor-outdoor carpet, worn smooth in spots. A nice round oak clawfoot table stood in the far right corner, beneath the windows.

Whatever was on the stove made his mouth water and his nose twitch. He moved over to her, close by the stove, and sniffed loudly. "By the way, what's cooking tonight?"

"Country fried chicken. And you'd better be grateful, Mister Carver. One of my best hens gave her all for this meal."

He nodded, then said seriously, "Should I maybe say a memorial service or something?"

"Not for the chicken. But if this apple pandowdy doesn't turn out for dessert . . . ."

He went to the table and pulled out a heavy, carved maple chair. He guessed the thing was twice as old as he was, but it didn't even creak when he settled his weight on it. Solid and old. Everything about this place, this town, was steady and comforting. Except for one thing, and he told himself not to think about it. Not tonight. He tried to convince himself he was here for information. That it was all part of the job. That he had no personal interest in this woman who'd invited a stranger to share her home cooking. Nothing personal at all.

She turned from the stove. "Hey, I'm sorry. Would you like something to drink?"

"Sure. What have you got?"

"I've got beer, and I think some bourbon."

"Bourbon, please, and a little ice and water."

She disappeared into a small pantry off the kitchen. He heard a sharp popping sound. She returned with a bottle whose oddly-curved shape was familiar.

"That isn't what I think it is? Was that a cork I heard in there?"

She poured a heavy dollop of liquid, the color of tarnished brass, into a heavy tumbler, dropped in two ice cubes, and held the glass under the sink faucet for a moment. "I don't know. This was my dad's taste. He liked it too much, maybe, but he never got around to finishing it before it finished him. I've still got three or four cases left."

He came over and took the glass from her hand while he examined the bottle. "I thought so. When did your dad pass on?"

"Been twenty years now."

Carver took his drink back to the table. It was Wild Turkey, ten years old when it was first bottled, now rounding on its fourth decade. He knew men who would cheerfully pay a hundred new dollars for each one of those bottles.

"Is it all right? I don't drink it, so I don't know what it ought to smell like, or anything."

"It's . . . just perfect. This is great, Andy."

"Say, Mr. Carver, do you have a first name? It doesn't seem right, me being Andy, and you Mister."

"Why, it doesn't, at that, does it? My name is Phillip. Phil, really. Phil Carver, ma'am, at your service." He raised the glass of bourbon and winked.

"Philip? That's a nice name. OK, Phil—" a quickly glimpsed grin—"let's go back into the living room for a while.

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All this stuff has to do is cook, and it doesn't need any help from me on that score."

"You sure there's nothing I can do?"

She stepped through the door into the front room. "You know how to build a fire?"

The whiskey sent long, slow, relaxing fingers up and down his limbs. "I think I can remember. I was in the Scouts, once."

"Right this way, then," she said. "It's going to cool off good tonight. A fire might be nice."

That it might, he thought happily, ambling behind her and admiring the way her hips moved beneath the thin cotton of her dress. It just might.

The meal was ambrosial in a country sort of way, the kind of cooking he hadn't tasted since his childhood. Somehow, the act of eating in the smoky old kitchen, his butt firmly planted on the creaking wooden chair, watching the shadows play on the fine angles of Andy's face, was immensely seductive.

Now they sat on the bulging sofa before the fire, sharing the companionable moments of the late evening. He sipped at his fourth drink, relishing the burnt umber taste of the whisky, and allowed his hand to fall gently, almost accidentally, on her shoulder. To his delight, she didn't move away, but instead sank back deeper into the cushions, sighed, and touched his hand with fingers as light as the biscuits she'd baked earlier.

"This is nice," she said.

"Mm. Is, isn't it?"

Then silence, while the fire hissed and crackled and tossed pieces of light about the darkened room. In the warm glow her eyes were soft and thoughtful.

"Penny," he said.

"What?"

"Penny. For your thoughts."

She smiled uncertainly. "I was just wondering what yours were. What you thought about me."

He knew what was bothering her. "You mean, do I think poorly of a small town woman who invites a man she hardly knows home for dinner?"

She shrugged, a tiny movement.

He nodded. "I think a woman has needs just like a man, except the fulfilling of those needs can be a gift. And the best gifts are the ones given without asking."

She stared at him. "Well, then."

He arched one eyebrow.

Her breasts rose and fell once, beneath the pattern of her dress. She stood up and stretched out her hand. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"To get that present unwrapped. Where else?"

He woke in mild surprise, the first swipes of dawn burning on his eyelids. He knew why he'd woken so early. It wasn't the strange bed—his whole life involved strange beds. It was the woman. He glanced over without moving his head and saw her curled next to him, her hair a honey-gray wave on her pillow. His eyes traced the outline of her body beneath the thick patch quilt.

What am I doing? he wondered. This is crazy. She lives here in this godforsaken town. She has to *know*.

He closed his eyes. She was so like Maddie, and so different. Why did the

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women who affected him powerfully all seem to have the stench of Gerrie about them? The Gerries had killed Maddie, in the firefight of the Chicago raid, and now this woman, the first to touch him as deeply as his dead wife, lived—maybe was even involved with—another nest of those insane would-be immortals.

Gerries. Even the thought made him want to curl up his toes in disgust. Another offshoot of the great technological revolution, and a particularly malignant one at that. Yet the way they found to survive was rooted in recent history, at the beginning, which led to a restructured concept of law and majority. Americans had learned as early as the AIDS epidemic of the problems of massive majorities and their accompanying massive minorities, when at one point almost eight million citizens had been interned in quarantine "villages" that were little better than concentation camps. The secession of California, which led to the Second Convention and the constitutional transformation that had done away with the "full faith and credit" clause of that document, had been an attempt to reduce the tyranny of the majority. Now minorities could group together into small majorities beneath the loose umbrella of the Second Constitution, and the hope was that something as ugly as the AIDS repression might never recur. So far it had worked, but holes in the new social contract inevitably appeared. The Gerries infested one such hole, flying to the legal vacuums created by innovative political structures. There they practiced new medical techniques, using immunomodulators and growth factors and ruthless surgical methods to extend their own lives, heedless of the misery they caused others. They found places where the law permitted their activities, or they created laws for other places. Nobody could police them all. Perhaps nobody even truly cared—after all, the bodies they stole, the organs they appropriated were few in number. And they had great wealth. That was always a shield.

The Group fought them, sought them out and killed them mercilessly. The Group fought other violations of what it considered "higher law" as well, the slavers, the drug people, but Carver knew he didn't really care about that. Gerries were his prey, and he knew that after Maddie was murdered, even "higher law" meant little to him. He would break that law, as well, if it became necessary.

But would he kill this plain, beautiful woman if it became necessary? *Could* he?

Carefully he slid out of bed and began to dress. When he was done he leaned over and gently brushed his lips across her forehead. She stirred, and a soft word escaped her lips. The word might have been "love."

He didn't know. But then, he wasn't sure he knew anything anymore.

As soon as he slid into his car and slammed the door, Kippie began bleating. "I called it in, Carver. You're nuts, you understand that? You spent the whole night in there with that woman. But it doesn't matter. When I realized you were around the bend I called it in. I've got the authority, you know that."

Carver glared at the little AI's cannister. "I know you do. If you think I'm psycho, you can do anything you

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want. OK. So you called it in. And then?" His teeth were grinding together so hard the muscles beneath his jaw sent little darts of white agony up into his skull.

"A full team is on the way. They'll be here this evening. I told Central everything we know."

Wordlessly, Carver floored the accelerator and listened to a rain of gravel spatter against the underside of the car as he spun out onto the street.

"Carver! Slow down! What do you think you're doing?"

"What do you care?" Carver said grimly. "I'm nuts. It's official. You said so yourself."

A worried note crept into Kippie's metallic whine. "I didn't mean you were really—I mean. . . ."

"I know what you meant. But if I hurry. . . ."

"Carver! Hurry and do *what?*"

"You'll see." He reached over and slapped the switch that disconnected Kippie's speaker. The AI's voice choked off in mid-squawk.

His eyes like frozen blue glass, Carver burned rubber for River Road.

He parked the small Yugo-Hyundai around the corner from the big, walled mansion and stepped out, ignoring Kippie's silent cannister. Overhead a bright blue jay rasped angrily. He glanced up and grinned tightly. Get mad, eh, boy? Like me, maybe.

But his anger at Kippie's treachery had subsided. If it could even be called treachery. After all, Kippie was his partner, but they both worked for the Group. Kippie probably thought he was doing his duty. Maybe he was.

The morning breeze curled lazily through his hair, carrying the odors of breakfast: bacon, coffee. Suddenly he was hungry.

He walked around, unlocked the trunk, and stared inside at the neatly strapped down boxes. Thoughtfully, he leaned over and unlocked the front box and flipped open its lid. The dull, greasy gleam of a General Dynamics mini-laser filled the top section. Beneath, he knew, were the powerpacks and booster for the deadly weapon. Arrayed across the inside of the lid were other implements of destruction and assault; a mono-mole sword, capable, once its meter of wire was stiffened by static electricity, of slicing through that brick wall like so much cream cheese. Gas pellets. Howler bombs, whose unearthly, overwhelming wails froze human nervous systems into neural traffic jams.

If he desired, he could be an army. Those Gerrie guards might be good, might even be pros of a kind, but against him they didn't stand a chance.

So do it, a part of him urged. Load up, strap on, and get cracking.

He stepped back from the trunk and stared up at the sky, his eyes crinkled against the vast blue dawn light of it. The air filled his nostrils with a clean openness unlike anything he ever breathed in the city.

This was too beautiful a place, he told himself silently. This part of the world changed slowly, if at all. Perhaps Indians had once regarded a sky like this, breathed this crystal air.

Perhaps monsters do today, another part of his mind pointed out. Ancient butchers with all the compassion of insects. He pondered what his anger had

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instructed him to do. It seemed straightforward enough. The hit team would arrive with the dusk, ten or twelve people and enough weaponry to take out a small city. They'd come in fast and hit hard, and be very, very careful to take as many prisoners as they could. Because after the dust settled, one of their number would open a kit and take out hyposprays loaded with exotic chemicals, and all the prisoners would begin to chatter happily. Would name names. Would divulge locations. Histories. Patterns. Conspiracies.

Eventually it would boil down to lists. And sometime, somehow, everyone on those lists would die.

Perhaps Andy would be on a list.

Not if he got in there first. Not if the bad guys were dead, not if their data files were "accidentally" destroyed.

He looked down at the trunk again and knew he could do it. Crack the wall, take out the guards and destroy everything inside that house.

What if Andy *should* be on a list?

He fought against the notion, told himself that anybody who was like her, who made him feel the way he did, could not be a monster, but—

Bullshit.

He reached up, caught the top of the trunklid and slammed it down. Got in the car, started the engine and drove away.

Sighed.

Turned Kippie back on.

The AI remained strangely silent for a moment. Then, "Carver?"

"Huh."

"Are you all right?"

"No."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the hotel. To wait for the team."

"Carver . . . I'm sorry."

"Shut up," Carver said. Something burned at the corners of his eyes. He ignored it and drove.

By noon Carver had finished most of a bottle of Dewars. He sat on his little patio, his feet up on another chair he'd dragged close, and stared down at the river. It made a low, steady roaring sound as it boiled over muddy rocks next to the bank. Autumn heat lay on him like wet animal hides. He felt the sun slowly etching the skin of his face, and knew he would feel terrible tomorrow.

Hell, he felt terrible today. What would happen? Could he just stand by and *let* it happen? Did he owe her *anything?*

He tilted the bottle by its neck and swallowed the hot liquid. He couldn't even taste it. "Kippie?"

"What?"

"You know anything about the social contract?"

The little machine sounded offended. "I'm educated, Carver. Of course I know."

"Tell me."

"It was a theory propounded by the philosophers Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, that a government could only govern with the consent of the governed, not simply by force alone."

"Hmm. How'd they arrive at that?"

"They pointed out that society in general first began with small groups of people banding together for mutual protection, and that out of those associa-

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tions grew the original concepts of law and sovereignty."

"Do we still believe that?"

"It's generally considered a basic concept of democracy, although the popular idea tends to include *any* social agreement, no matter how changed from the original idea."

Carver thought about it. "But the Gerries band together for mutual protection. Are they included?"

"As long as their idea of protection doesn't extend to slicing livers out of unwilling victims. Then they become the predators people band together against."

"They break the contract, huh?"

Kippie's voice was dry. "You could say that."

After a while the scotch ran out and Carver stood up and clumsily threw the bottle into the river. It didn't sink immediately, but bobbed downstream in the current, the sunlight catching it like a sapphire, growing smaller with the distance. Carver watched it go. Then he wiped the sleeve of his shirt across his forehead. He went back into the hotel room and shrugged on his sport coat.

"Are you leaving?"

"Yeah," Carver replied. "Don't worry. I'll be back."

"Carver—"

But he was gone.

The interior of the barbecue was dim and cool. He went through the flimsy screen door like a fullback, scanning the small public area without seeing the familiar figure he sought. He turned toward the opening into the kitchen.

"Andy!"

"What? Who's that?"

Without a thought he stepped past the counter and pushed the swinging doors into the back part of the restaurant. She was there, bent over an open oven, a rag tied around her sweating forehead, struggling with a huge roast.

He clumped over to her. "Here. Let me help." Grunting, he hoisted the heavy roasting pan to a table, exhaling a cloud of raw scotch into her face as he did so.

"Phew," she breathed. "Boy, you must be plastered."

He turned, leaned against the table and breathed hard. After a moment he said, "Am. Am drunk, that is. Doesn't matter, though. Andy, I got to talk to you."

Two creases of alarm grew above the bridge of her nose. "Phil, something's wrong? Something I did?"

He wanted to shout, cry, take her in his arms, anything, but he forced himself to calm down. Take a deep breath, count to ten. She stared at him, her green eyes wide.

"Andy, listen to me. What do you know about Doctor Hollister? Him and that big place on River Drive. You know anything about that?"

And wanted to vomit at the expression that scrabbled across her face, the sick, guilty sheen of it, before she caught it like a dirty magazine, folded it, and put it away.

"Doc Hollister?" she said slowly. "What about Doc? Phil, I—"

Tiredly, he shook his head. "Forget it, Andy. It won't do. It's too late." Feeling every day of his years he turned away. "It's too frigging late."

Her fingers dug painfully into the meat of his arm and turned him. He

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stared at the expression of fear—no, terror—which twisted her features into a horrible mask. "Don't *do* this, you sonofabitch," she screamed. "Who *are* you? What do you *mean*, it's too late?"

He shook his head again. "You know about him, don't you?" he said softly. "You know what he—what they—are. Maybe you're one of them too?"

The rag around her head came loose as she shook her head back and forth, her hair a frenzied net around her skull. *"Know what? What are you talking about? Who are you?"*

His head throbbed. All he wanted to do was leave, go back to the hotel, wait for the end. But her manic terror wouldn't free him, wouldn't let him go. He told her.

When he finished, she stared at him, her face momentarily as blank as a stone. Then something primal blazed from her eyes and she screamed.

"My son. You bastard, you've killed my son!"

The word didn't quite register. He licked his lips, dumbfounded by her silent agony. The tableau held for a single paralyzed moment, then shattered and fell on the floor.

"I think," he said carefully, "you'd better tell me."

And she did.

Adrenalin was burning the scotch out of his system, but his head still felt fogged and slow. He rubbed his hand hard against his cheek. "Let me get this straight," he said slowly. "Your son doesn't get any older? Is that what you're telling me? That he's some kind of immortal?"

"I don't know what he is. Whatever fancy word to use. Doc Hollister uses all kinds of words. Ask *him*," she said bitterly.

He should have put it together, but he hadn't. The husband dead in Nam Two, thirty years before. Her air of stretched tension. And that recent picture of the young boy, so hauntingly reminiscent of the older man in the other pictures. It didn't necessarily mean the boy was her son—so he'd thought at first. But now she said it was her boy. And he believed her.

"Tell me again," he said. "How it started."

She sniffled, but her expression was stiff and defiant. "Doc came, at first, I remember. When Mike was fourteen. Doc came from Chicago, just him and Homer, his handyman. Bought that big old place on River Road. And then, later, the laws started to change. People began to turn up missing. I knew something was wrong, but not what it was. This went on for a couple of years, and then Mike got sick. Started out as colds, fevers, sweats. Seemed like he got anything that came along. And got weaker. Wanted to sleep all the time. I took him to Doc Gentry, our regular doctor, and he couldn't figure it out. Finally, he suggested I go to Hollister. He said Doc Hollister was from the big city, probably knew more about things like this. So I went."

"It was Mike's immune system, wasn't it?" Carver said gently. The AIDS epidemic had been beaten down, a vaccine discovered, treatments perfected, but for years after that initial victory the virus had cropped up in out-of-the-way places.

Andy nodded. "Uh huh. That's what

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Doc Hollister said. But he said he had a new treatment, something about diffuse fetal cell thymus transfusions. I didn't understand. Still don't, for that matter. All I cared about was that it worked. Mike got better. After a while he was back to his normal self, playing basketball, just like always. He had to go in for checkups every month, but that was nothing. It was only after a couple more years that I began to notice. He didn't get any older, didn't grow up."

Her shoulders began to shake, but she didn't seem to notice. Carver reached out and took her upper arms gently in his big fists. "And then?"

"I went back to Hollister, of course, and asked him what was going on. At first he didn't tell me, but then he admitted it. He'd tried something he'd been working on all along. Used my boy for a guinea pig. I didn't know whether to hate him or what. My boy was alive. Maybe Mike was some kind of a freak, but he was mine, and he was alive. A miracle."

"I'll bet Hollister thought so."

She rubbed her reddened eyes, fumbled in her apron pocket for a handkerchief, blew her nose once, loudly. "Then one day Mike didn't come back from his checkup. Doc called me instead, told me to come over. That was when he told me about the Gerries," she said. "I didn't understand at first, but finally I did. He said he could treat others using something from Mike. It wouldn't hurt him, but he couldn't let Mike go. He had to stay in the big house. I could visit any time, but Mike couldn't leave. Then Doc brought in those guards. And Homer started keeping a real close eye on me."

"I saw them," Carver admitted. "Big city boys."

"Nobody disappears any more," Andy said. "That's one thing. Whatever they did before, they aren't killing people now."

Carver thought about it. "That puzzles me," he said. "Why have those laws? It's a red light to people who can spot it, and I'd think the last thing they'd want is somebody like me tripping over them."

"I didn't even know you existed, your group, whatever. But he explained it once. Said that Gerries know about each other, know how things work. Protect each other if they can. And if he set up in some small town and things didn't look normal, the death laws and all, other Gerries might get suspicious, especially if people still didn't get any older. They all work for it, you know, some kind of treatment, and they're all afraid somebody else will get it first."

Carver nodded. He was too familiar with the ruthlessness of the old monsters, and imagined that Hollister knew it even better than he. Yes, the smoke screen of fake laws made sense.

"I've put my foot in it, haven't I?" he said at last. "He warned you that if you told anybody, he'd kill Mike, didn't he? And I have the rotten luck of kicking this all off when he's got him up there in some kind of plush jail."

Mutely, she nodded.

"Well," he said, "at least I can do something about *that*."

Slowly she raised her head, hope and fear struggling in her green gaze.

"You can? You think you really can?"

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Shakily, he tried a grin. "Bet your ass," he said.

And he did. It was actually easier than he'd expected. The guards were pros, but they'd gotten fat and lazy doing garrison duty in the sleepy village. Even at their best they weren't prepared for somebody like him. He'd descended on them with thunder and lightning and gas, moving like an avenging banshee. It was over in less than five minutes, his last act was to cut down Homer as he rushed to unlock a heavy wooden door on the second floor of the house. Behind that door Carver found a frail, dark-haired teenager who looked at him with huge green eyes and said, "Is it gonna be over now?"

Doc Hollister took some waking up, but Carver had the chemicals for that, as well as for the questions afterwards. He left the house with one boy who was thirty years old, some computer records, and some lab samples.

He left nothing sentient behind, and as he drove south across the city limits, he could see a thick pillar of smoke rising behind him.

Now, in the darkness, he stared at the road ahead and wondered if he'd covered every possibility. The hit team would find nothing of value in the ruins. They would recognize his handiwork, no doubt, but he would be missing too. Nobody knew about the boy but himself and Andy—and some folks who were now dead, and a few others who wouldn't *ever* be talking. He'd made very sure of that in his questioning.

Behind him, Mike snored softly on the back seat, a slim, darkhaired youth with his mother's green eyes and a secret for the ages in his body.

Was he doing the right thing? He wasn't sure. A thought curled softly in his mind and he remembered that those who had originally banded together had been families. The first social contract had been a family one. Even now, in the greater world around them, vast forces fragmented society into ever smaller groups, as people fought to protect themselves from the tyranny of themselves. The whole idea of the social contract was changing—no longer did people wish to band together into larger and larger groups, for the very size of those groups threatened their individual members. Nevertheless, the tyranny of the majority remained, and only slowly was its potential for harm diminishing. In the meantime, the minorities would try to protect themselves as best they could.

Maybe it would change. But he could well imagine the fragility of any contract in the face of what the boy carried in his cells. Perhaps some social contract specified that he turn the boy over for the greater good. Perhaps . . . but Carver decided that if he had anything to do with it, and he *would* try to—the boy could at least have a chance to make some of his own decisions.

Odd family. Tired old man, beautiful woman, ageless boy. And a cranky computer that he couldn't quite bring himself to destroy, although he wouldn't yet connect Kippie to a communications interface. Kippie rode on the floor of the backseat. After all, he was family too.

"What's that you keep muttering?" she asked.

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"Hm? Oh. Social contract, probably."

"What's that?"

He reached over and patted her knee lightly. "The one the world has now?" he said. "Nothing I remember signing."

And laughed, and drove on. ■

ON GAMING

(Continued from page 91)

Zak McCracken and the Alien Mindbenders. The plot involves aliens who don fake nose/eyeglasses combinations as they try to operate their machine to make humans stupid.

(There's a machine we certainly don't need.)

Gameplay is similar to *Maniac Mansion* . . . it's completely accessed by joystick and a simple list of commands moves your lead character around. A big change is that the scope of the game is much wider. There are eight different cities Zak can visit, not to mention other buildings and planets. Unlike Maniac, you start with just Zak. Friends and accomplices are picked up along the way.

Battle Chess is a marvelous new program due out from Interplay, to be distributed by Activision. *Battle Chess* is a full-scale, powerful chess program. And more. The pieces actually battle for the spaces in a wonderfully animated sequence. The game can be played without the animation, but it makes pawn-takes-queen even more delicious.

Activision's Gamestar line was also promoting *Pete Rose's Pennant Fever*. It offers multiple screens, just like watching a game on TV, and it features a simple batting and pitching system.

Mindscape was also showing two impressive looking games. *Willow*, based on the George Lucas film, allows players to select different events from Willow's adventure to play. The games sported great graphics and down-played violence. Play of the games, though, at least on the IBM, seemed a bit stodgy considering their arcade nature.

Captain Blood is a French game of space exploration that Mindscape will be translating and releasing, and it recalls the bio-mechanical designs of H.R. Giger for the film *Alien*.

Spinnaker was readying the release of *Ace 2*, a sequel to its UK import *Ace*, the most enjoyable fighter game I've played. Continuing with that motif, they also had *VCR Dogfight*, a combination boardgame and VCR game that looked like it might actually make intelligent use of the videotape . . . something that's eluded a number of VCR games.

Also eagerly awaited . . . but not on view . . . *Samurai*, from Microprose and *Rocket Ranger* from Cinemaware.

Rocket Ranger offers the beautiful young daughter of a famous scientist "held captive by a gang of godless goosesteppers!"

Who could ask for anything more?

More about *some* of the above as most of them make their appearance . . . ■

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Probability Zero

RADIO SILENCE

K. Howard Laurence

"But we've got to keep listening," the director said. "You don't understand. The possibilities are—well, they're vital. Vital to the entire human race."

The chairperson of the Oversight Committee on Space Research sighed. "I'm very much afraid that we do understand," he said. "For sixty years, you have been spending large sums of money on a listening project. Sixty years is a very long time."

"It's less than the blink of an eye, considering the age of the universe," the director said. The hearing was not going well. But he had to win them over; the project had to continue. *Had to.* "Many civilizations may be awaiting contact with us; there may be messages now on the way—"

"Sixty years is quite long enough," the chairperson said. "The fact is that the basic question has gone unanswered since before the start of your project, almost since the beginning of Project Ozma: where is everybody?"

"Surely," the director said, "there are answers."

"Certainly there are answers," a committee member put in. "Perhaps there are already aliens among us. Disguised as human beings. Or pigeons —after all, we can't be narrowminded about this."

"It is no joke," the director said furiously. "Listening for the first sign of alien intelligence—"

"Maybe they are already here," another committee member said. "Maybe they're getting ready to judge us. To offer us membership in the Galactic League."

"Or the Society of Concerned Intel-

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ligences," the first member added.

"Or the Nova of the Month Club," the chairman put in.

The project director set his jaw grimly. "I must insist that humor of this sort is wholly inappropriate to—"

"To sixty years of listening, with no results?" the chairman asked. "To sixty years of *funded* listening, with no results?"

"To the chance, however faint, of hearing the first message from an intelligence other than ours," the director said. "That first message can be of incalculable importance—"

"The difficulty," the chairman said quietly, "is that we're being asked to calculate it. In a new grant for the project."

The director took a deep breath. "I must insist," he began, "that a message from an alien intelligence would be of such great import to the human race that—"

"Just how long," asked a committee member, "are we expected to keep on with all this?"

"Probability theory dictates that another hundred and twenty—"

"Unless the next word is 'seconds,' " the committee member said flatly, "I don't think we're going to want to listen."

"But the incalculable value of a message from an alien—"

"Quite," the committee chairperson said. "The discovery that broccoli is an intelligent plant and can converse with us would also be of great importance. Which says nothing about its probability."

"But we can't be the only intelligent life form in the galaxy," the director said. "It is simply inconceivable—"

"I don't see why," the chairperson said.

"But surely you can understand that the chances—"

"What we can understand," the chairperson said, "is that a very large sum of money has been spent on this project, over a very long span of time. And we—"

"Sixty years is not a long span of time."

"An eyeblink," a committee member said. "From an extremely large eye. If the aliens are all that sizable—and all that slow—perhaps we're better off not knowing about them."

The director looked shocked. "How can you possibly make jokes about an event that might have vital — even mythic —overtones—"

"The fact is," the committe chairperson said, "we are just not disposed to throw bad money after good. Or good money after bad. Whichever way that's supposed to go."

"But surely the mere chance of contact—"

"The mere chance of contact," the

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chairman said, "has kept you, and your associates, in funds for sixty years. Perhaps by cutting your own salaries—"

"They have been cut three times in ten years," the director said, not without melancholy pride. "Most of us have survived on our savings. A few have been on United Welfare payments for as long as five years."

There was a little silence.

Then a committee member said, quietly: "We applaud your dedication. However, we cannot allow it as a substitute for the voice of reason. I take it that, even with the lowered salaries —even with support, as you have just admitted, from United Welfare—it would not be possible to continue without a new grant-in-aid?"

"Not for six months more," the director said. "I must insist that the high seriousness of this endeavor demands from each of you a recognition of the value of alien intelligence, the value of eventual contact—"

"The value," the chairman said, "of still another lengthy grant-in-aid. Quite so. I am afraid, however, that this committee cannot agree to . . ."

"Grddnk?"

"What now, Fnnbzl?"

"They've been quiet a long time, haven't they?"

"Well . . ."

"Think they're relaxed enough?"

"Now, Fnnbzl—"

"But by now they have to be relaxed enough. By now they're *sure* nobody's around. Just Earth beings. Nobody else."

"Not yet."

"But they have to be sure now. They've been quiet for such a long time."

"Now, Fnnbzl, you have to be patient—"

"I've been patient for—*forever*. I'm *tired* of being patient."

"Fnnbzl—"

"Can't we jump out and say 'Boo' *yet?*" ■

●What is more mortifying than to feel that you have missed the plum for want of courage to shake the tree?

Logan Pearsall Smith

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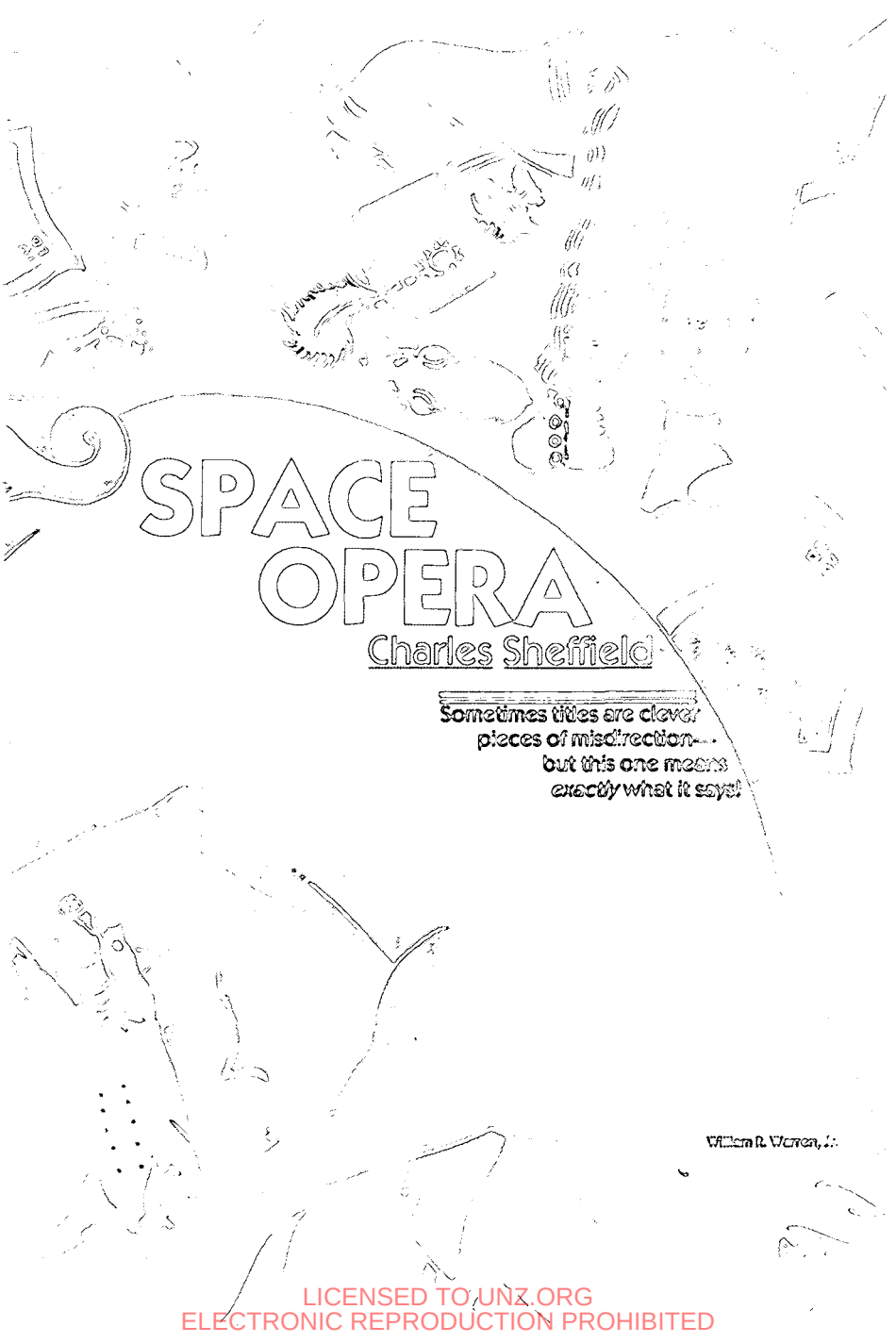

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Nothing in the universe is ever lost completely. It may be misplaced, or transformed, or even apotheosized, but it never truly vanishes.

This must be true, because my partner, Waldo Burmeister, told me so himself; and Waldo, as he will modestly admit if pressed, is never wrong.

I watched him as he scrabbled hopelessly at the piles of files, briefs, and legal papers on his desk. He long ago adopted the sedimentary system of filing, and was now maybe thirty-six months into the past. He finally sat back and threw up his hands. "It's not here. Someone must have taken it." His tone was accusatory.

"We'd better go," I said. "They'll all be waiting."

I shepherded Waldo out and locked the door behind us. Not, I admit, because our chambers were crammed with valuable documents. Our last case, Waldo's defense of an accused arsonist, had been over six months ago, and even that was not an overwhelming success. On the third day, the judge declared himself more than ready to accept a plea of insanity, but from Waldo rather than from the defendant. That was after our client had weakened his earlier "not guilty" plea by setting fire to the clerk of the court.

In a word, we needed business. I gave the sign "Burmeister and Carver, Lunar Partners-at-Law" a farewell polish with my sleeve, then hurried Waldo along the corridor before my nemesis, the Widow Welsh, could pounce. She had buried three husbands, and from the gleam in her eye Henry Carver was the top choice for a fourth interment. Maria Welsh wasn't bad-looking, actually, but I didn't care for the way she took the caps off beer bottles with her teeth.

Today she was nowhere to be seen. Waldo and I headed for the Lunar Customs Office, and a meeting there which was supposed to be a formality. We would work with our client, Signor Beldini, to complete the papers that licensed him for a theatrical performance in the L-4 Colony's main hall. If only Beldini would keep his mouth shut, it would be easy.

We could hear him shouting from outside the room. When Waldo and I entered, he at once turned to meet us. "Maestro Carver, Maestro Burmeister, you know what dey telling me?"

Beldini was a tall, skinny gentleman, with legs so bowed that he looked like a device for taking the tops off large sealed jars. I shook my head at him, but Waldo ignored our client. He was staring beyond Beldini.

"Dis idjiot"—Beldini pointed at the customs officer; how to make friends and influence people—"he say I not have right to put on opera. My own opera. *Balaclava*, dat I write wid my own head! I tell him, go stuff 'imself."

I looked inquiringly at the customs officer, Frutkin. He had been no particular friend of mine since I sold him shares in the Polish/Irish proposal for a space colony at the L-1 Libration Point, and my honest explanation, that I had bought even more shares for myself, had left him unpersuaded. Waldo had been dealing with him recently, but at the moment my partner was in another world. He was still standing in the doorway with his mouth gaping open.

The object of his attention was an imposing blonde lady dressed all in

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white. She had to be Griselda Gestetner, Signor Beldini's star soprano, whom he had brought up with him from Earth. Her upper arm was thicker than my neck, and the rest of her was in proportion. When Tennyson wrote that woman was the lesser man, he had obviously never met Griselda. It was said that her top C would shatter a wine glass; seeing her, I was prepared to believe it would crumble a length of drainpipe.

"There's a counter-claim on performance rights by Miss Gestetner," said Frutkin to Waldo, who totally ignored him. "Another gentleman, Herr Dieter Glick, states that he has Miss Gestetner under binding contract."

That stimulated a howl of rage from Beldini. "Dat Glick, he is one big chit. He my rival, back on Eart', an' Griselda," he gestured behind him, "she work wid him before she come to me. But now she 'ate him. She work only for me."

The object of the dispute sat contentedly eating a two-pound box of peppermint creams. I could read Waldo's expression now. It was not covetousness for the candy, which I might have expected since he was in the middle of one of his own strenuous dieting efforts; it was rapt admiration.

Beldini's own expression suddenly became worried. "*Momento,*" he said to Frutkin, "I need Mr. Carver's privates."

He led me outside the room, peered around in all directions, then leaned forward to put his mouth two inches from my ear.

"We got to be very sensuous in de way we treat Griselda," he said to me confidingly. "She mus' not get upset, because I want her to do good. She get upset easy now, because she has, you know, a huge bum."

Well, yes. But it was hard to understand why Beldini would—

"Her las' performance, you see—singing in 'De Buggers's Opera,' for dat *paisano* Glick—it was disaster. A huge bum."

"A bomb!"

"Yerss, a huge bum. Dis time, it mus' be different. We mus' suck cess. An' now I am worry. You see Griselda' face when de man say Glick? She get sad. Nothin' mus' go wrong! So I wan' you an' Maestro Burmeister to come wid me to de Colony for de nex' two weeks, until performance. Make sure we have no, how you say, accidentals."

"But the expense—"

"Expense no problem. I am Beldini, I am genius, I pay everyting. But you mus' make me an' Griselda licentious, so we can go."

Two weeks, twenty-four hours a day, fees plus expenses. "Mr. Beldini, leave it to me. I'll get your license."

He smiled, and shook my hand warmly. "I know you can be trussed. Is so good to work wid you, I love your English authors so good. Diggins, I love Diggins—Oliver Twiss; David Copperfield, Bob Crapchit, Little Doris. And Fanny Hill."

A character, presumably, in "A Sale of Two Titties."

"And Housman," he went on. "Ah, 'De Shropshire's Lad.' " He leaned close to me, and again Luna's supply of garlic wafted in. " 'When I was one an' dirty, I hear de wise man say, Give

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clowns an' pounce an' gwinnies, But not your harse away—' "

"Wonderful to be working with you, too, Mr. Beldini." I backed away, mind reeling, before he could get into his stride. Next he'd be offering Milton's "Parasites Lost," Bigfellow's "It was the Scooter Hesperus," or Shelley's famous "Owed to a Shylock" ("Ale to thee, blithe spirits, Beered thou never wert").

"And don't worry," I said. "Mr. Burmeister and I will get you the license *and* a clearance to travel to the Colony. You just concentrate on your music."

I went back into the room, where Waldo was now sitting next to Griselda Gestetner and engaging in mindless small talk. He didn't want to move, but I pried him loose and took him and Frutkin into the next room. Waldo looked around him as though he had suddenly been transported to Jupiter, then removed a small phial of pale yellow liquid from his pocket and put it on the chair beside him.

"Let's stop stalling here and talk business," I said to Frutkin. "You know what we need. Beldini's copyright, and the performance permission. What do we have to do to get it?"

He was still peeved at me, but he heard the distant rustle of money. "There are formalities that must be observed," he said. "On some of them, I have no latitude. For example, what about the specimen that I asked you for."

"We have it," said Waldo.

"At least a paragraph," went on Frutkin. "We must have a substantial specimen of Beldini's handwriting before we can confirm original copyright."

Waldo gave me one gloomy look and removed the bottle of yellow liquid from the seat between us.

"No problem," I said. "We will provide the handwriting sample to you. But can we do it after the fact, and make an early departure for the L-4 Colony? Time is money."

"Hmm. I suppose it is. Maybe rather a lot of money." Frutkin looked away to the corner of the room, while I quietly leaned forward and slipped an envelope under his notebook.

The way of the world. He checked it, nodded, and grudgingly admitted that he might take care of things to permit immediate departure. I went and told Beldini the good news, while Waldo wandered over to make sheep's-eyes at Griselda. Waldo Burmeister, who had in the past perceived women only as potential cooks! Something was badly wrong with the man.

Beldini, on the other hand, became wildly exultant. "We leave tomorrow, in de morning. I knew you do it," he said to me. "Beldini, he pick his knows right. An' I have de more good news for you, Maestro Carver. I hire de personal assistant for work on de Colony. *Bella bellissima*, here she come."

He gave a flourish of his arms. And towards me, with a wide, welcoming smile, came the Widow Welsh. I looked at Waldo for mental support. He had his mouth full of peppermint creams, and the simpering look on his face made me want to throw up.

"We one person short. Mrs. Welsh, she finish team," went on Beldini. "She feel up your gap."

She looked more than ready to do it, too. I retreated hastily.

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* * *

On the way to the L-4 Colony I began to understand Beldini's interesting definition of legal counsel. It included all the duties of cabin boy on an old sailing ship, with one dubious exception. I ran errands, duelled with Frutkin, arranged licenses, soothed Beldini, and did enough work for two men.

I had to, because Waldo was useless. He was totally infatuated with Griselda. If he wore a jacket of a certain style, it was because she had admired it. If he wore his thinning hair just so, she had suggested it. If he shunned certain foods, it was because she disapproved of them.

Not that he did much shunning of foods. He had forsaken his perennial diet and was swelling visibly in size, because, he explained, "Griselda admires big men." By that criterion, she ought to adore him.

While he helped himself to vast second servings of everything, I lost weight steadily. I was running myself ragged. Although Widow Welsh was more than eager to help me, when she was around I found I couldn't concentrate at all. I made the mistake of telling her, and she grinned knowingly and hung closer than ever.

Fortunately, all bad things must come to an end. We reached the Colony. My hassles changed from long-distance fights with Frukin to closer ones with the local Colony authorities.

One problem in particular started to give me fits. Back on the Moon I had heard Beldini declare that he would perform his opera, *Balaclava,* on the Colony, but I didn't think through the implications. For one thing, I had never heard that work. It was one of those modern excrescences on the musical scene, and on twenty-first century operas I agreed with Rossini's assessment of Wagner's *Lohengrin.*

"It is not a work one can judge on a single hearing," he said. "And I certainly have no intention of listening to it a second time."

I had heard one of Beldini's masterpieces, and that was enough to close my mind to the rest. So not until Scravage, the grouchy interface provided by the Colony, pointed it out did I realize that *Balaclava* as conceived by Beldini, included the Charge of the Light Brigade.

With the full brigade.

In free-fall.

"We'll never get the Colony to agree to it," I told Beldini.

He waved his hand in the air. "You fix. No big deal."

That little item took fourteen separate meetings, and even at the end of it I obtained only grudging approval. "We grant the license," said Scravage, "but I warn you that I do so holding you *personally* responsible for any trouble."

"Me responsible! But our contract with the Colony explicitly permits us to—"

"Personally responsible," he said again, and stalked out. I think it was only my threat to get Beldini involved again that made him agree at all.

Progress was slow but steady, for we had, thank God, a seasoned stage manager, Larry Lanark, who took every ridiculous request in his stride—mainly by having a perpetual hangover so bad that he was unable to worry.

Other things went less well. Waldo was now talking of marrying Griselda,

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returning with her to Earth, and giving up the practice. This, after all our years together! We had been partners since we left law school.

It was the unkindest cut of all. Waldo and I were making lots of money for the first time ever, and now he was proposing to use it to break up a great combination.

Work was the only thing that kept me sane in the whole mess. But that anodyne lost its strength on the fourth morning after we arrived. I went to the theater early, just to see what was happening, and heard strange noises coming from the great hemispherical production area. I opened the door, and recoiled.

The whole stage was filled with women. It seethed with them, teemed with them—from footlights to backdrop to wings. There were gum-snapping, cigarette-smoking blondes, sultry, fur-clad brunettes, innocent milkmaid redheads, women with whips and leather boots, women with fangs, women in schoolgirl uniforms, women in evening dress, women in kimonos, women in rags, women in coronets, women in cages.

A full-figured young lady with bright red lips, rouged cheeks, and a straw hat girdled by a ribbon that said "Kiss me, Moon-man, on the Farside," took my arm and said, "Morning, sweetie. Feeling friendly?"

I shook loose and went to look for Larry Lanark. He claimed to have seen everything that the stage could offer, which as he pointed out included the whole of the real world as a subset. He was in his office, drinking coffee and applying cold compresses to his forehead.

"Where did all the women come from?" I said.

"Beldini told me to get 'em. It wasn't easy." He looked at me with gloomy pride. "I had to scour the whole bleeding Colony and half the Moon to find 'em."

"Get rid of them. Right now." I turned and went to find Beldini. He was tucked away in a little room under the stage, drinking sambuca. He gestured to me to sit down.

"You gave directions to the stage manager last night?" I said.

"Yerss. I tell Larry, we need six hundred whores. He get already?"

"Mr. Beldini, I've got bad news for you. Horses can't stand free-fall. They vomit and go into convulsions."

"Naw. Iss so?" He was horrified. "But what about my whores? We need six hundred whores for Charge of Light Brigade. 'Ow we do widout? What animal stand free-fall good?"

"Very few. Elephants do all right. And goats. Pigs are the only ones that are really comfortable."

"Hokay. Den no problem." He snapped his fingers. "We send away whores, we get pig, use him instead."

"For *Balaclava*? It's impossible."

"For you, because you are just de good liar." (I wished he'd learn to pronounce my profession.) "But Beldini" —he tapped his forehead— "he is director, an' he is genius. He can do."

I retreated. Pigs. It was a close thing, but given the choice I thought I'd prefer to see the Charge of the Light Brigade done with six hundred whores.

I went back to the stage. It was still packed with women. I made my second trip to Larry Lanark, who had pro-

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gressed from cold compresses to hot towels.

"Larry, we have to get rid of the girls and get six hundred pigs."

He shook his head and winced at the movement. "I won't do it."

That gave me a sense of relief. "You can't get six hundred pigs?"

"Sure I can. But I'm not going in there to tell those women that they came all this way for nothing. They'd tear me apart. You do it, if you want it done."

"Larry, it's not my job. I'm a trained lawyer, not Beldini's clean-up man. It's *your* job."

"Maybe you think it is. But I told you, I won't do it."

Deadlock. We glared at each other for thirty seconds, unwilling to budge. Finally, I thought of a compromise.

"All right, Larry. I'll call Waldo, and say Beldini told him to do it."

A happy solution. But even with that sound decision made, the morning was not the best one of my life. I needed to talk to Mrs. Welsh about Griselda's special diet, and I had the misfortune to catch her in a state of some *déshabillé*.

I'll say this for her, she was still a lady in spite of her prior marriages. When I came into the room she blushed in places I didn't know one could blush.

"I'm sorry." I closed my eyes and backed out rapidly. "I'll catch you later."

"Ooh, saucy." Mrs. Welsh giggled. "I bet you will. You men, you're all the same! I know what you're like!"

I'm sure she did. But later that day, she told Waldo that she and I now enjoyed a "special relationship." He was delighted, and babbled of a double ceremony.

Marriage talk again! Things were getting really serious.

The next morning I came late to the theater and opened the door carefully. I had a horrid half-suspicion that the stage would now be filled with auditioning pigs. Instead, it was again awash with people. They were all milling about and variously attired, as soldiers and jockeys and royal courtiers, and a substantial number of them wore soldier's uniforms and were brandishing pistols.

A normal enough audition. Except that none of them was more than three feet tall.

This time I ran to Larry's office. He was sitting with a towel round his head, bent over a bowl of steaming green fluid.

"Larry, have we switched to *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"No. Why?"

"I told you to get pigs. But there's—"

"Ah." He peered out from under the towel with one bloodshot eye. "I got the pigs."

"But then what—"

"You never told me what you wanted the pigs for." He looked at me accusingly. "Otherwise I could have told you, there isn't a well-trained stage pig that masses over ninety pounds. Beldini took one look at them and said they were too small. Even he knew you couldn't ride a seventy pound pig. But then he had what he told me was a stroke of genius. He told me to find six hundred—"

"Larry, the man's a lunatic. You can't stage The Charge of the Light Brigade with midgets on pigs."

"You're right." His head disap-

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peared back under the towel, and his voice became muffled. "I can't, and I'm not going to. But I'm not a genius. That's for Beldini to worry about—him and you. I just have to find the wardrobe people and look for six hundred midget soldiers' uniforms. Remember, Mr. Carver, the show must go on."

And go on it did, despite an unnerving call I received from Frutkin, back on the Moon.

"I feel obliged to provide you with the following information," he said. I could tell he still didn't like me, but you don't cut off your sources of bribes. "According to reports I have just received, Herr Dieter Glick passed through Farside Customs yesterday morning. He has a legal visa, and by now he may be on the Colony. Also, he has publicly declared that the performance of Beldini's *Balaclava,* with Miss Griselda Gestetner as star, will not take place."

"Glick! Beldini says he's a lunatic!"

"I'm sure he's right: It takes one to know one. I suggest you may wish to put on a special watch for Herr Glick. He could be dangerous."

Just what I needed—one more impossible job to be done. "We'll watch, of course we will. But how the devil will we recognize him if we do see him? There's *thousands* of people on the Colony."

"Ah, there you're in luck," said Frutkin. "You can't miss him. Herr Glick is only three feet tall."

I passed the word; and then the panic started. With Beldini urging us on, we scoured every inch of the theater and its environs, looking for the hated Herr Glick. There was no sign of him, and we came to dress rehearsal with no hint of sabotage. With less than twenty-four hours left, we had no more than the normal chaos of an opera in free-fall involving a genius composer, a temperamental soprano, six hundred trained pigs, and six hundred midgets.

I went along to the theater expecting nameless troubles, but everything went as smoothly as you could wish.

Even the finale worked, with the saddled pigs and their diminutive mounts soaring high above the stage while Griselda, fifty feet below, made sounds like a steam whistle, held her arms wide, and implored the dying heroes to fly to her at the moment of their death.

I thought the pigs and riders looked rather good. They were projected by a giant multiple-armed ballista on the left side of the wings, out of sight of the audience. A new segment was fired every few seconds, which allowed realistic waves of mounted pigs to be propelled across the upper stage. Each midget was wearing the same well-fitting red and grey cavalry uniform, and Larry had even made the pigs look more plausible by adding false feet to extend their legs and tying long false tails onto their naturally curled ones. They sounded a little non-horsey, but you can't have everything. They all disappeared out of sight on the right side of the stage, and were caught in a huge net.

I had been convinced that the machine would throw them wide and they would fly off to God-knows-where; but it didn't happen. Every one came sailing out on the planned path, and landed safe on the netting.

Waldo came on stage at the appro-

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priate moment, covered in fake blood, and sagged happily into Griselda's waiting arms. At the final wrenching chord I did more than applaud—I cheered, and went back to my rooms considerably relieved.

One more day, I said to myself. Just let everything hold together for one more day. That's all I ask.

And hold together it did. Finally, it was time for the performance itself. We did one more fruitless search for Herr Glick, then the search had to be abandoned. There was nothing more to do but sit and watch.

I paced the wings and bit my fingernails, but absolutely nothing happened that had not been planned. By the start of the third and final act I was at last beginning to relax. Fifteen more minutes, and the great event would all be over.

Everything continued without a hitch. Beldini was happily conducting what he believed to be music, while Griselda was in fine form, bellowing and trumpeting her ghastly arias as the first-night audience of the Colony's wealthy fingered their jewelry, and appeared well-satisfied with the cacophony.

Then suddenly Larry appeared next to me; he had in tow one disconsolate midget dressed in long underwear.

"Strange problem," said Larry. "We're one cavalry pig short."

"I don't believe it. We were right at rehearsal, and you counted them again this afternoon."

"I know I did. Odder than that, we're a uniform short, too."

I was running before he finished the sentence. "We're not a pig short," I shouted over my shoulder. "We're a midget extra."

I wanted to dash in four directions at once, but you can't do that even in free-fall. I had to have help, and my instinct took me to the dressing-room of my old and trusted partner. Waldo was already there, changing in preparation for his grand entrance. He was wearing a cavalry jacket, suitably tailored for his increased girth, and a spiked military helmet. As I opened the door he was standing in the middle of the room in red-and-white checkered underpants, trying to decide if he should put his boots on before his trousers, or his trousers on before his boots. Both seemed impossible.

"Waldo, we're got a problem," I said. "Glick's here."

"Who?" Love had done something fundamental to Waldo's cerebral cortex.

"Herr Glick. Beldini's deadly rival. He's here."

"Oh, I know that." Waldo stood there casually, holding his trousers in his hand. "A little fellow, isn't he? I met him outside the theater, and he came in with me. He told me he wanted to wish Griselda the best of luck for the performance."

What had Walso been doing when we were all screaming and searching? Mooning over Griselda, what else?

"Waldo, he wants to sabotage her performance. Didn't you know? He's an old flame of hers. She dropped him for Beldini, and now Glick hates both of them."

"An old flame?" I had hit on perhaps the only words in the English language that could get through Waldo's mental

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glaze. He went red with rage. "I'll kill him."

"First stop him, then kill him. You know what he looks like. Go and check the left side of the wings, make sure he hasn't tampered with the ballista. I'll handle the stage and right side."

He was off without another word, a rumbling ball of wrath. I ran along the corridor to where I could see the stage. All was well there, with Griselda fast approaching her climactic aria. I scurried along the pit, to where I could see the whole right side of the stage.

At first I breathed easy. The nets were still there. But then I saw that instead of hanging loose they had been tightened hard, like a trampoline.

I began to run left, then realized I'd never get back across the stage in time to prevent the great spaceborne Charge. It was due to begin very soon—in a minute or less.

And then I looked up, and saw that it had already begun. Glick must have tampered with the timing of the great ballista, and the Charge was here ahead of schedule. Unmounted pigs with shouting midget cavalry-men grabbing for their reins came out in waves across the vaulted arch of the upper stage. I saw a surging sea of unready pigs, pigs ridden back to front, pigs zooming along upside down, pigs turning end-over-end and squealing in excitement. They were accompanied by a horde of yelling, waving midgets. In un-serried ranks—was there a man dismayed? —they swept across the stage and vanished from the sight of the audience.

The Charge of the Light Brigade was ending almost before it had begun (noble six hundred) but as the last midget vanished, one final entry appeared from the wings. It was Waldo, just seconds too late at the ballista to prevent the disaster but in time to catch the mechanism's last spasm. He came sailing out above the audience, and I was pleased to see that he still had his sense of decorum. Aware that he suddenly had a large audience, he was making a noble but unsuccessful effort to put on his trousers.

He was still trying, checkered underwear resplendent in the spotlights, when he disappeared from view. Three times as big and heavy as anything else that had flown over the stage, he was following a quite different trajectory from the rest of them. I estimated that he would miss the nets completely, and fly off right down the high corridor that led towards the outer edge of the Colony.

In that direction lay the Colony's agricultural facility, hydroponics, and waste-recycling plant. Waldo's only hope of survival was a soft landing in one of the Colony's sewage treatment vats. I wished him well.

A louder scream than usual brought my attention back to the stage. I looked up, and saw Griselda at the climax of her aria. She had been too busy singing to note Waldo's appearance and disappearance, high above her, and now she was calling for her dying hero and gesturing desperately for Waldo to appear from the wings.

She held a high C for ages, waiting and waiting, while the orchestra made accompanying sounds like buzz-saws, and Beldini kept his baton raised high. At last, a solitary circus-trained pig that had somehow escaped the ballista's

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grasp ran on stage and jumped happily into Griselda's arms.

I must admit, Griselda was a real trooper. She carried on singing, while her voice and the pig's ecstatic squeals provided an eerie anharmonic counterpoint. In the orchestra pit I saw Beldini start, lower his baton, and stare at the stage with a wild surmise.

And then, at the soprano's final strident note, a tiny, uniformed figure ran out from the wings, snatched the pig free of Griselda, and flung it with a dramatic gesture into the middle of the orchestra's timpani section. The man jumped high in the air and embraced as much of Griselda as he could reach —roughly one-third of the way around her.

Fortunately, the audience had by this time lost interest in all activities on the stage. The tight-drawn netting in the wings had done its job as a springboard, and now it was returning its bounty. A cascade of honking pigs and cursing midgets fell like the gentle rain from heaven onto the bejewelled heads of the orchestra stalls. Both sides seemed less than happy with the encounter.

Of poor Waldo there was, alas, no sign. I crept away. Time to leave. The Charge of the Light Brigade was over; I didn't want to be present for the recriminations.

I was in my room, quietly packing my bags, when a call came in on the videophone. It was Scravage, glaring out at me.

"I have had a hundred complaints already," he said. "Any suggestion of attempting a performance again is, of course, unthinkable."

He held up his hand and his face took on an expression that suggested a bad smell had been released at his end of the line. "Before you attempt to argue that you have a signed and valid contract, I am instructed to tell you that rather than becoming involved in some extended and ludicrous legal imbroglio between Signor Beldini and Herr Glick, the Colony wants you all to leave at once. We are prepared to buy out the contract, including your own legal fees. The condition for this payment is your immediate departure from the Colony, along with Mr. Beldini and his whole entourage." His face took on a happier expression. "I am also instructed to tell you that if you do not accept these terms, you will all be charged with committing a public nuisance, and placed under Colony arrest. It will be your responsibility to convey these facts to Mr. Beldini."

"He'll never agree! He'll tell me to—"

But I was addressing a blank screen. Before I had time to seek a reconnection with Scravage, the door opened.

It was Waldo, back from the dead. From the look of him, he wouldn't be staying long. I had not seen the termination of his trajectory, but it was clear that he had landed in the thick of it.

He dropped into a chair next to me, one vast, muck-plastered globule of misery. "She's dumped me!" he wailed. "I went to see her when I got out of the vat, and she said it's all off. After all my work, she blames me for the whole mess."

"Maybe it's just the way you smell." I was edging away from him. "If you

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were to go and clean yourself up, right now, and then—"

"No, no." Waldo shook his head mournfully, and rubbed his eyes with a filth-covered knuckle. "You don't understand. She's going to marry Dieter Glick! He told her that he did the whole thing for love of her, that the thought of losing her had made him crazy. He proposed to her an hour ago, sitting on her knee, and he told her she makes him feel there are unconquered challenges, mountains in his life still to be scaled. She's going to wait for him, until he gets out of jail. How can I compete with that?"

He dragged himself to his feet and staggered out, leaving only a rare effluvium behind. I was standing up to raise the air-conditioning fan a couple of notches when the door opened yet again. In came Beldini.

I prepared for a difficult explanation, in which I would blame Glick for everything. But instead of being enraged, Beldini was beaming. And immediately behind him, oddly coy and demure, came the Widow Welsh. He took her by the hand.

"Wonderful news!" he said. "Dis execrable lady just agrees to become my awful wedded wife! I promise her we weed each udder today, an' den we go straight to Milano for honeymoon."

He stepped nearer and whispered in my ear. "An' dere I will work on a new opera! Wid someting in it no one never see before in music! A true *Roman* opera—*Horatio at de Bridge*—wid de startlin' new musical defects. I am not disgusting wid you right now, but I send you ticket when finish." He winked. "You keep my secretion, OK?"

I wasn't sure his new effects were as big a secret as he thought. I had seen his face during Griselda and piggy partner's final moments of song. *Horatio at the Bridge*. I could imagine Beldini's libretto. ("Lars Porcina of Clusium, by the nine gods he swore . . . ")

"But dere is one udder ting," said Beldini. "Because I mus' work on my opera now, we can 'ave no more performance here. Is piteous, yerss, but love an' work, she come first. So you take care of detail, eh, wid fix contract here? An' I pay you extra."

I never grasped a happy couple's hands with more sincerity. "Signor Beldini, I am very happy for you. Mrs. Welsh will make a gorgeous, exciting bride, and you are a handsome, talented, and lucky man."

He beamed wider. "I am delightful. Your remarks is most flatulent."

Well, no, that was just the lingering presence of Waldo; but I saw no reason to correct him. We shook hands again, two men well content with the world and all that's in it.

The loving couple departed. I returned to packing my bags. Who says there's no such thing as a happy ending? ■

●Thinking is hard work. One can't bear burdens and ideas at the same time.

Remy de Gourmont

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the reference library

By Tom Easton

The Hormone Jungle, Robert Reed, Donald I. Fine, Inc., $17.95, 300 pp.
A Splendid Chaos, John Shirley, Franklin Watts, $17.95, 359 pp.
Fire on the Mountain, Terry Bisson, Arbor House, $15.95, 176 pp.
Araminta Station, Jack Vance, TOR, $19.95, 554 pp.
Saint Mary Blue, Barry B. Longyear, Steel Dragon Press (Box 7253, Powderhorn Station, Minneapolis, MN 55407), $9.95, 332 pp.
Cradle, Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee, Warner, $18.95, 293 pp.
Nebula Awards 22, George Zebrowski, ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $19.95 hb, $11.95 pb, xii + 368 pp.

Robert Reed emerged from the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest. Along with a few other of our latest crop of SF writers, he proves anew the old truth that the best way to grow good crops is to cultivate and fertilize them. The cultivation is a function of the WOTF workshops. The fertilizer is the ample—and encouraging—wads of prize money WOTF gives its contest winners. And the result, though it shouldn't, has surprised me. You know from things I have said in the past that I view Hubbard's own fiction as insulting to the intelligence (have you noticed that since I panned the decalogy in part by saying I could find no sign of satire to justify its ridiculousness, they've been billing it as S*A*T*I*R*E?) and that I think the "religion" he founded is as opportunistic an example of sucker-trapping as anything of which the TV evangelists of recent fame are guilty. Not surprisingly, I have considered the Hubbard money funding the WOTF contest as tainted.

The taint, if any really exists, is irrelevant. The money functions as fertilizer no matter where it came from. And one of the many possible examples

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that prove the point is Reed's **The Hormone Jungle.**

The time of the story is some two millennia hence, when Canada is given over to tribal societies at constant war with weapons that inflict pain but do not kill, Equatorial elevators link Earth to an orbital civilization, and cities are hotbeds of technology, industry, and crime, surrounded by farmlands. Everywhere biology is malleable, with gengineers creating new crops, new critters, new people, such as the Flowers whose short lives are dedicated to giving pleasure. There are ordinary humans, modified humans, and those "ghosts" who have had themselves transferred into the memories of computers.

And then a gengineer finds a way to transfer a ghost into the body of a Flower, wipe its memories, and assign it to get close to a certain criminal kingpin, find out where he hides his wealth, and steal it. She succeeds. But the kingpin soon nabs the gengineer. An accomplice dies. The poor Flower flees.

Fortunately, she soon meets up with Steward, a free-lance trouble-shooter from Yellowknife. She uses the pheromones, which she has control over, to enslave his will (although, perhaps, she needn't). They are lovers, and he will find a way to get the kingpin and his henchmen off her back.

Meanwhile, Steward's neighbors, a cyborg from hellish Venus and a nasty-minded hermaphrodite from Ganymede, are at each other's throats. Their troubles reveal more of the intricacy of Reed's invented world. They also help make Steward's enlistment of the cyborg and his buddies make sense, and therefore lead into the victory that caps the tale.

Hormone Jungle is the sort of tale that John D. MacDonald might have written if he had begun his career in the 1980s. Or maybe it's one for Dick Francis —remember where Steward comes from, his training in bearing pain, the typical vicissitudes of a Francis hero (or, for that matter, of Travis McGee). Steward is the sort of hero that keeps getting up for more, even after the villains drop a safe, from the roof of a skyscraper, on him. Mashed, bleeding, suffering, he comes through in the end.

Have you ever wondered whether that isn't what "pulp" hero means?

John Shirley's latest, **A Splendid Chaos,** is undeniably energetic, but it is more chaotic than splendid. It opens as Zero, Bowler, Angie, and Cisco, four Manhattan college students, find a disco weirdly set in an intersection. They enter, dance, enjoy the open bar—and then the music stops, everyone keels over, and the disco takes off. It is, you see, an alien starship. The next thing our heroes know, they are on the strange world of Fool's Hope, where many sentient species, all kidnapped by the alien Metas, have enclaves. What are the Metas up to? No one knows, but all have guesses; most seem to think it a game, with the various sentients intended to interact—competing, warring, cooperating—as the Metas watch, perhaps laughing their alien heads off, perhaps gambling on the outcomes.

Certainly the Metas watch, through silvery balls that float above any scene of action. As certainly, Fool's Hope is set up to keep the action moving: it is a world rich in IAMton deposits (don't ask: IAMtons are the particles of thought and psychic activity emitted by consciousness, but as any mystic knows, the more closely you try to examine the stuff of psychic phenomena, the more elusive it becomes), and an IAMton wind blows sporadically, transmitting sentient beings into physical forms more

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consonant with their inner selves. To boot, the Metas have established Progress Stations which, if any sentient can win past the obstacles of nature and intelligence that surround them, provide technological gimmicks—tools, processes, weapons—that enhance that sentient's abilities.

Zero et al. join a human settlement dominated by a behaviorist psychology professor from their own school. Zero learns the ropes and leaves to find a rumored Progress Station. The change-wind blows, and the prof becomes the Emperor Harmony, xenophobic, telepathic, able to order the change-wind pretty much as he wills, mad, mad, mad. The settlement goes to hell in a handbasket. Zero and his alien companions struggle on. Eventually, they succeed in their mission, and we learn—what? If I say too much, I run the risk of spoiling the tale. Can I be vague enough? Let's see—blood and pain and death as the only art that sells; Metas as analogs of our own TV networks, watching all and treating suffering as theater, and as worship; victory as freedom from observation, while the Metas move on to larger stages, with more players.

Shirley here says some things that need saying in a culture that glorifies violence. He does it deftly and smoothly and with a suitable dollop of puns, jokes, and satire. But as I read I felt that his aliens, his marvels of setting, his events, all were far too arbitrary. I had no sense, for instance, that his aliens fitted real worlds, real ecologies; they were conglomerations of parts chosen and assembled for their weirdness, not their sense, the sorts of things a small child would build from some weird mixture of Mister Potato Head, Transformer, and Tinker Toy parts. Chaos, yes, and more that than splendor.

* * *

Terry Bisson earned plaudits for his last novel, *Talking Man*. Now he's doing it again with **Fire on the Mountain,** a beautifully done speculation on what the world might be like if John Brown had succeeded in his 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry.

In the world as we know it, Brown failed, was caught, and was executed. His martyrdom helped to precipitate the Civil War. In Bisson's world, Brown succeeded and sparked a war of a rather different sort. The result is a socialist Black nation, Nova Africa, replacing the plantation south. The U.S. of Bisson's 1959 (the year of the story) is a northern, Yankee nation. The southwest was reclaimed by Mexico. Africa is the continent with a space program.

Why 1959? That's the centennial year. The story's protagonist is Yasmin Abraham Martin Odinga, whose husband died on the first African Mars mission. She is on her way north to Virginia, after returning from a dig at Olduvai, delivering to the Harper's Ferry museum the papers of her great-grandfather, a doctor who, as a youth, saw the beginning of the Brown-triggered war and later became a distinguished physician. She is three months late, just as was Brown himself in our world.

We see the world of Bisson's 1959—airships with whispering plasma engines, living shoes, Black socialism, a fragmented, nonmonolithic America, all echoing the truth of the idea that racism, sexism, oppression of any kind, are quite evil enough to curse just because they waste human talent—through Yasmin's eyes. We marvel at both its differences and its similarities. Perhaps we weep for what our history has denied us, though Bisson makes it very clear

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that his America has paid enough of a price for war and rebellion.

How did it all get that way? Great-grandpa's papers tell the beginning of the story. A sheaf of letters supplied by the museum curator, written by the young medic who eventually trained great-grandpa, tell more. And we believe. Bisson has done a marvelous job of capturing the convincing flavor of faded daguerrotypes, the significant minutiae of the past. With him and his characters, we see that fire burning on the Virginia mountaintops, and we cheer as the local blacks slowly slip away to join the rebels "on the mountain" and northern abolitionists gravitate to the Brown banner.

Don't miss this one.

Once upon a midnight dreary,
while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious
volume of forgotten lore,
While I nodded, nearly napping,
suddenly there rose a clapping,
As of something gently flapping,
flapping on my chamber floor.

I apologize to the ghost of Edgar Allan Poe for my liberties. He wasn't, but he might have been, writing about the sleepier moments in a book reviewer's life, when the book slips from the nodder's lap and strikes the floor with a clapping sound, and the little breezes that play with the kitties in the corner flap the pages back and forth.

I apologize as well to Jack Vance, for I am leading into a review of his latest massive book, a return to SF, **Araminta Station,** the 550-page first volume of the multivolume *Cadwal Chronicles,* and it is not as dreary as my little game might suggest. But it did make me think of Poe, and it did prompt the game, and you may take that as some indication of the sort of story Vance has produced this time out.

Cadwal is a world that was set aside, centuries before, as a nature preserve. Its sole residents are supposed to be the caretakers of the Naturalist Society (whose surplus children must leave Cadwal at their maturity) and their temporary employees, who are allowed to live and breed on an offshore island. Now the Naturalist Society is all but extinct, the Charter that defines the proper order of things in Cadwal cannot be found, the Yips are itchily conspiring to move onto a nearby continent, and family intrigues among the caretakers bid fair to destroy everything.

The protagonist is Glawen Clattuc (Vance will never lose his knack for names), a teen whose first encounter with those family intrigues comes when Spanchetta, a schemer who once had eyes for Glawen's dad, maneuvers to give him an impossibly high Status Index. This number, assigned at each teen's sixteenth birthday, defines the kid's chance of staying on Cadwal. A high number means the kid will surely have to leave. With the scheme defeated, Glawen goes on to his first true love, loses her to an unknown murderer, recovers, and grows up. Eventually, in his role as a Cadwal cop, he finds that the Yips are raising money for their conspiracy by selling a nasty form of ceremonial murder. He must go offworld to track down the clues, spend time trapped in a monastery as strange as only Vance could make it, and eventually come home to put the blame where it belongs. Sadly, he then finds his father missing, and the next volume will surely lead the reader in pursuit of that mystery. Meanwhile, Glawen's second love has gone to Earth to search for Cadwal's Charter; that mystery, I

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expect, will resurface in each volume of the series until it is resolved at last.

Araminta Station is intricate, convoluted, fanciful, precious, contorted —all the adjectives that spell Vance to the experienced reader. However, it is less active than we might wish, and certainly less active than Vance's older tales. The modern appetite for lengthy novels, and for series—for literary elephantiasis—has encouraged many writers to forget all that they ever learned (I know Vance did; did the rest?) about the value of brevity. The result is that *Araminta Station* is readable only with difficulty and many yawns, and this is what brought Poe's classic poem to my mind.

Barry B. Longyear will tell you the story if you but ask: not too long ago, he was a drunk who put away a fifth of the hard stuff a day. An alcoholic. He popped tranquilizers. He had a near-fatal heart attack when he was just in his mid-thirties. He stayed a drunky and a junky. His writing wasn't going well. And then he got smart enough to sign up for the rehabilitation program at Saint Mary's Hospital in Minneapolis. He arrived, full of resentment, blacking out, resisting any suggestion that any "God" might be able to help him, hating the thought of anything to do with Alcoholics Anonymous, for he wasn't an alcoholic, not him, not really. He just had this little problem, and he could let go of the sauce anytime—it had been a week, two weeks, three . . . since his last nip. Never mind the tranqs in his pocket, the massive headaches, toothaches, bodyaches, tantrums, fits of depression, et cetera ad nauseam, that arrived when the nurse took his pills away. And then, *every* single godforsaken time he tells someone he's a writer, they say, "If I were a writer, I'd write a book about this place."

So he did. He came around, realized just how bad off he was, accepted the program, learned of "tough love" and fellow feeling and sobriety with help, saw the roots of his problems, learned that you have to throw off the load of shit you carry but not before you grab it in both hands and give it a good sniff. He learned that every group that goes through the program at Saint Mary's is much the same—the atheist, the priest, the housewife, the businessman, the student, the punk, the writer—and that he could indeed tell the tale without violating any confidences. The characters are to some extent generic, differing only in names and small details, and he could tell the story using types, assigning to each character details belonging to several real patients. This applies, presumably, even to his protagonist, Jake Randecker, SF writer, award winner, short, tubby, bearded, pipe smoker, Maine resident. Jake is Barry to a T. But though I know that Barry really has been to Saint Mary's, I do not know how many of the details I enumerated in the last paragraph really apply to him. They are Jake's, though Barry admits in person, in front of audiences, that Jake is him.

The book is **Saint Mary Blue.** I review it not because it has anything directly to do with SF, but because—genre be damned!—it concerns one of our own, and because it is a valuable book. It is something everyone with "a little problem" with alcohol or drugs should read, before or after rehab. It is indispensable for all who must live with or deal with such people. And that means it is a definite "must buy" for most of you, my readers. You need it. You will benefit from it, for you will learn what can be done to help those who are ad-

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dicted to chemicals, and those who are addicted to addicts. You will also enjoy the hell out of it, crying for the agony of Jake and his fellows, squirming whenever something seems to strike a little closer to home than you find comfortable, laughing uproariously at the jokes that punctuate the thing, as the only possible relief from unremitting pain.

My only objection, when I finished the book, was that it did not feel complete. Barry tells his tale in excruciating detail—you feel the pain, sweat, and tears—up to the moment where Jake truly embraces the program and begins to heal. He then leaps to the one-year return visit and ends the book in just seven more pages. On later reflection, I realized that that feeling of incompleteness may indeed be the best note on which to end the book. The message is clear: "Once an alky, always an alky. You may stay dry, but the only cure is in the grave." (And not even then, if you count embalming fluid.)

The saddest thing about the book—and in a sense the most joyous as well—is its reception. When Barry completed his manuscript, he sent it off, loaded with all his hopes, to his agent. That worthy person shook his head and said, "This just isn't a Barry B. Longyear story," Then he sent it out, to publisher after publisher. Every one of them rejected it, saying, "This just isn't a Barry B. Longyear story."

Barry was, shall we say, upset. If *Saint Mary Blue* wasn't a Barry B. Longyear story, then what the hell was? He had lived it, damnit! Happily, he had given copies of the manuscript to several friends, in and out of his post-treatment support group. And he never saw those copies again. People passed them to others who just had to read it. Eventually, Barry got a call from Will Shetterly, the publisher of Steel Dragon Press, saying he had just read it, he thought it marvelous, but he couldn't publish it because all he published was science fiction and fantasy.

As Barry tells the story, that was OK with him, since he hadn't submitted the book to Shetterly anyway. But then, two months later, Shetterly called again. He just *had* to publish it! Genre be damned!

Prove him right, folks. Order copies. Order them by the dozen, and give a copy to everyone you know who needs one. Boost the book into a standard text for recovering addicts by giving copies to rehab programs and counselors. And while you're at it, read a copy yourself.

Cradle is a curious thing. It's rectangular, it consists of a whole lot of sheets of paper joined at one edge, and those pieces of paper are covered with words. That is, it looks like a book. Since it also comes from a book publisher, we might be pardoned for thinking that it is in fact a book.

But if you open the thing, you will be confused. There is a title page that says the book is by Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee. Two pages later, however, there is a list of "credits" that says Clarke is the "Production Designer" and "Director," Gentry Lee is "Location Manager" and "Producer," Russell Galen (better known as an agent) is "Assistant Director," Cooper and Austin Lee (presumably of some relation to Gentry) are "Story Consultants," Stacey Kiddoo Lee is "Casting Director," and so on, through "Executive Producer," "Production Executives," "Logistics and Catering," and "Research Assistants."

Obviously, we have here a novel that thinks it's a movie. There are other similarities as well, for *Cradle*'s story is intensely visual, full of coral reefs,

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whales, sea serpents, bizarre aliens, weird technology, and even a state-of-the-art computer game. That story begins when the Navy tests a new missile and something warps its course. The missile is lost. The Navy is in a flap. Reporter Carol Dawson gets wind of the missile, rushes to the Florida Keys, rents a boat, and takes her high-tech lover's new and wonderful ocean-bottom scanner to sea. Instead of the missile, though, she finds an alien spaceship, there to deposit a "cradle" full of gengineerically optimized embryos of Earthly life, including humans (said embryos being derived from stock taken on a previous visit millennia before). The ship must also make repairs, and to that end it eventually enlists Carol and her hired divers. To this, add a few Navy types more than willing to ride roughshod over anyone they think is in their way, a nasty trio of treasure-hunters, and. . . . Add to this a parallel story line that explains what the aliens are up to—here is where the sea serpents come in; the aliens are environmentalists given to preserving endangered species—and you have the sort of weird and marvelous stuff that Hollywood might handle very well.

Clarke has never been famous for his stylistic pyrotechnics, nor for fully realized characters. His strengths have always been his overarching themes and the marvels he devises in support of them. Those strengths are here, but the style is so much plainer than his usual that, as I read, I could not help but call it stylistic oatmeal.[1] As for the characters, I found them plastic mannequins, set by some stage manager (not listed in the credits) in clichéed poses, never breathing, never living. Like the mannequins in store windows, *Cradle*'s suffers occasionally from terminal cuteness, as when Carol, seized and thrown to the ground by a female thug, repels her assailant by kissing her. I have seen cardboard with more verve, originality, and life.

Who wrote this one? I *think* Clarke's role was to think it up and oversee the job. I *think* Gentry Lee did the actual writing. I *think* that then—in a very Hollywoodian pattern—an impossible amount of kibitzing from the rest of the production committee turned the original Clarkean vision into oatmeal and plastic.

And I suggest that you give this one a miss, on both page and screen.

Nebula Awards 22: SFWA's Choices for the Best Science Fiction and Fantasy 1986, edited by George Zebrowski, is now available. SFWA is the Science Fiction Writers of America, Inc. Each year, its members, qualify for membership by having published an SF novel or three SF short stories, nominate what they think are the best novels, novellas, novelettes, and short stories, vote, and give Nebula Awards to the winners. The results of this judgment by one's peers do not always agree with the results of the readers' worldcon vote (the Hugo award, named for that Hugo Gernsback who founded pulp SF with *Amazing*), but they often do. They do not always —or perhaps even often—agree with the judgment of the ages either, but what the heck. We live in the now, and for now, at least, the award-winning stories are impressively good. They may continue to earn plaudits for decades. They may not. We can safely leave that to the future.

So what's in *Nebula Awards 22?* There's an introduction by Zebrowski, an essay by Isaac Asimov on how to become a Grand Master, an essay by

1. I don't like *real* oatmeal.

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Algis Budrys that attempts to predict who might warrant Grand Master Nebulas in the year 2000, a report on 1986's SF movies, the two winners of the Science Fiction Poetry Association's Rhysling Award for short and long poems, appendices that tell all about the Nebula Award and list past winners, and nine stories. Among the stories are the Nebula-winning short story, Greg Bear's "Tangents"; the winning novelette, Kate Wilhelm's "The Girl Who Fell into the Sky"; and the winning novella, Lucius Shepard's "R&R." The novel winner, Orson Scott Card (for *Speaker for the Dead*), is represented by a shorter work, "Salvage," a marvelously sympathetic portrayal of life among flooded-out Mormons. Zebrowski filled out the book with several stories that made the Nebula ballot but did not win; they include Asimov's "Robot Dreams," Judith Moffett's "Surviving," Suzy McKee Charnas's "Listening to Brahms," and Gregory Benford's "Newton Sleep." They need no plaudits from me; their inclusion in this book is praise and recommendation enough, and you should rush right out and buy the book. If you have seen all the stories already, thanks to the various Best of the Year anthologies, then urge your library to get a copy.

ANADEMS

You saw the first two chapters of Don Sakers's **The Leaves of October** (Baen, $2.95, ? pp.) in these pages. They introduced the Hlutr, sapient trees who, on worlds throughout the galaxy, live for eons and supervise the evolution of lesser beings. When humans arrive on the galactic scene, their initial thought is to wipe us out as vermin, but wiser heads (crowns?) recognize our virtues and the Hlutr decide to work to improve us, too. There are thus certain similarities in spirit to Clarke's and Lee's *Cradle;* I think you will find Sakers's book more readable.

I need say no more. ■

●A man has made great progress in cunning when he does not seem too clever to others.

La Bruyere

●Wisdom is what's left after we've run out of personal opinions.

Cullen Hightower

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brass tacks

Dear Dr. Schmidt,

Your May 1988 editorial, "An Experiment On People," was in the finest traditions of John Campbell. You have stirred a passive reader to his word processor.

My problem with your experiment is that it is one where it is impossible to gain the consent of the person being experimented on. Decisions to perform experiments on children can be made by parents, but they are done only when the child's life is in danger. Such experiments are not made for such trivial reasons as to prevent ingrown toenails, acne, or wisdom teeth; all things that I think we can safely do without. You've either picked the wrong genetic flaw to correct, or the wrong experimental subject.

You could pick a serious disease, one where you could identify unborn infants who might be at serious risk of death. A family disease, such as Huntington's chorea would make a good candidate. Then, a parent's choices would be either to have no children, to bring children with a good chance of having Huntington's disease into the world, or to allow their children to be experimented on, hoping that they would lead healthier lives than they might otherwise have.

Another alternative could be to experiment on consenting adults. We are getting closer to the realm of science fiction here, but it may one day be possible to infect a human with a virus that could correct a known genetic flaw. I see no moral problems with such experimentation.

I believe that genetic engineering is an art (hopefully soon to be a science) that must be allowed to be practiced on human beings. I see no reason for my diabetic friends to be slowly whittled away by gangrene just because some Luddite doesn't want us "playing God."

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But, your immodest proposal starts us down a very dangerous path, one for which I can see no ethical defense.

Thank you for a stimulating editorial!

RALPH LE VAN
6855 Conquistador Ct.
Dublin, OH 43017

Dear Stan,

In re: wisdom teeth, et al. (Seems that writing to you is becoming a habit —showing that your editorials are fulfilling their objective?) Two points. First, technical: I think it important, when discussing genetic engineering, to avoid the common error of assuming some simple correspondence between genes and physical structures.

Genes don't know "tooth," or "ear," or "appendix." They deal at a much more fundamental level with the production of specific chemical compounds, under very specific circumstances. If properly orchestrated, this activity may affect the development of body parts . . . but it would seem quite odd if such activity resulted in the production of one tooth . . . and nothing else.

Perhaps the obverse of the saying, "No man steps twice into the same river" might be "No man can do only one thing"? Personally, I suspect it will be quite some time before real genetic "tailoring" of the higher life forms can be accomplished. To edit out our wisdom teeth might require not just the deletion of one gene but also the adjustment of hundreds of others to neutralize the unwanted effects of that excision.

Point two: philosophical. I read with some amusement the paragraph wherein you hold forth on the need to control the new technology. Perhaps by this time you might even smile at it yourself. Particularly the line about how "we" will have to make sure that the technology is used only by "qualified" persons for "legitimate" ends. . . . Isn't that just a tad pompous? Why not vote, instead, for freedom with responsibility? Start out by "letting" people do what they will, so long as they accept the consequences.

Ahhhh . . . consider chain saws. Obviously a powerful tool, even a dangerous weapon. Just imagine. If we permit all and sundry to obtain and use them, the horrors that might ensue!! Why, some gang of irresponsibles might even go out on some dark and stormy night and amputate every telephone pole for miles around!! The potential for vandalism, for mayhem, shudders the mind!! Otherwise, I'm in complete accord with your views. Unfortunately, you are not just assaulting a straw man. There really are quite a few people around who will maintain, in effect, that lacking omniscience we should eschew all action. Anything we do might have a bad effect. That kind of "reasoning" defies even genetic surgery!!

WARREN RAYLE
6880 Columbia
Olmsted Twp., OH 44138

*"Letting people do what they want as long as they accept the consequences," is dandy as long as they are the only ones who must accept the consequences. In the case of genetic engineering (as with most other medicine) this is by no means the case—*most *of the consequences are* always *borne by somebody else. For that reason some regulation tends to be needed in the real world. Anybody can buy a chain saw because it can reasonably be assumed that it will not normally be used on other people. The same is not true for the practice of medicine because that is* always *done on other people. You may think that "legitimate use by qualified persons"*

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sounds pompous, and I'll agree that it isn't easy to define the crucial terms—but I see no responsible way to shirk the attempt to do so.

Dear Mr. Schmidt:

I read your editorial with great interest (May '88 issue). Genetic engineering is without question one of the most important politico-scientific issues of our time. I'm taking the time to write this because it "struck a nerve," if you will.

While I fundamentally agree with all that you said, there is a factor, or maybe more accurately a constellation of factors that you are (I assume) aware of but may not have felt like dealing with in the essay (?). *Why* are people so god-awful paranoid about genetic engineering to begin with (firstly) and, given that they are, is there *any* reason for the paranoia?

It's my opinion that at least to some small degree, paranoia is a very healthy reaction to the attitude the public used to exhibit which was to accept whatever *the authorities* declared to be true—about anything—as on the identical level of certainty as the laws of classical physics. Obviously, medical science was not the only sphere where this was the case. A very large percentage (frighteningly so) of the American people were supportive of Joe McCarthy's effort to make America safe for anti-communists. Why? Because he was a U.S. senator and, since he was *in* his office, in power, ergo he *must* be right.

In the post-Watergate, post-Tonkin Gulf Resolution, post-thalidomide (sp?) atmosphere of today, far more people are far less trusting of *all* authority, be it scientific, commercial, or political. No one that I know was all that surprised to find out the federal government was supporting the rightist terrorists fighting in Nicaragua when it was against the law to do so. Not surprised, just cynical.

A similar lack of confidence in the scientific community intensifies in the face of the continued expansion of the AIDS crisis. The medical party-line changes monthly as to what it is, what can be done to fight this, and the only reasonable advice is "don't share needles and (in essence) don't have sex."

An even more serious crisis of confidence vis-a-vis the scientific community exists due to the recent fiascoes around the world in the area of nuclear power. Now, I am aware that it is *possible* to build a *perfectly* 100% safe nuclear power facility. It has been done. What has *not* been done is convincing the powers-that-be, in the investment banking area, that what was done in *that* case (ie, the case of the totally safe reactor) must *also* be done in *all* other reactors. The result: Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and a petrifying number of smaller (in terms of media coverage) accidents at both government and private facilities in the U.S. and god-knows-what around the world.

All your statements are reasonable and true in a world where all (even "most" would do) people with responsibility for such far-reaching decisions, as I've mentioned above, and genetic engineering can be trusted to a) get every single scrap of pertinent information (I'm talking indefatigable, here) and b) put "the public good" ahead of anything else—be it profit, personal aggrandizement, whatever. Do we live in such a world? I wish we did but I don't see much evidence of it.

Am I saying experimentation and research should not be carried out till we achieve some kind of renaissance of consciousness? Hardly. *If* such a renaissance ever occurs, it would be absurd not to be ready for it. Experiment, by

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all means. All I ask is that, somehow, the proliferation be tightly controlled. I am *not* suggesting that *you* suggested otherwise. It might even "go without saying." Ultimately, I'm afraid, far too many of us here on Earth can't be trusted with our own future. Sad, but I don't see another conclusion yet.

I haven't even touched on the fact that the number of scientific conclusions of what *must* be true (at the time) were subsequently proved to be the opposite! Was powered flight by a heavier-than-air vehicle not declared "physically impossible"? I have no problem with your proposal about use of large groups of humans and control groups. *They* might, though. They are just as possibly going to thank whomever was responsible for their inclusion in the experimental population. We can't tell today. Is there such a thing as scientific agnosticism? I think maybe there should be.

I, personally, would be a great deal less hesitant to throw my support behind such efforts as you discussed if I saw more scientists talking about how *little* is actually known at this stage of our culture about the world around us. Maybe that isn't reasonable but without more of an exhibition of that sort of admission, I find it very difficult to trust the people whose profession is to handle the very core and essence of our future as a species on a daily basis.

STEPHEN H. LAURETTE
41-63 Frame Pl
Apt 1F
Flushing, NY 11355

Dear Dr. Schmidt,

Harry Turtledove's "Lure" was charming. However!! *Diceretherium* is a true rhino that lived in the late Oligocene in Europe and the middle Oligocene into the early Miocene in North America. *Cynodesmus* and *Syndyoceros* are both late Oligocene genera but they are confined to North America. *Cynodesmus* was a fox-sized dog that couldn't take on a rhino the size of a domestic pig or larger.

The ancestral hippo would be an *Anthracothere* and again as large or larger than a domestic pig. Picky, Picky, Picky!!

How many other *Analog* reading vertebrate paleontologists have dumped on this?

J. R. MACDONALD
Rapid City, SD

●Genius might be described as a supreme capacity for getting its possessors into trouble of all kinds.

Samuel Butler

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IT'S ANLAB TIME AGAIN!

Mid-December is our last issue for 1988, and once again we'd very much like you to let us know how we're doing, via The Analytical Laboratory. The authors are interested, I'm interested, and you should be interested. Not only will your votes provide tangible rewards for your favorite authors and artist, but what we know about your likes and dislikes will influence our selections of what to offer you in the future. So *please vote!* Here's how:

Look over all your copies of *Analog* dated 1988, or refer to the annual index which will appear in our January 1989 issue. Pick your *three* favorites in each of the following categories: novella or novelette (a single category, for AnLab purposes), short story, science fact article, and cover. (Since there were only two serials this year, you won't be voting in that category.) List your choices in order of preference (your very favorite in each category is #1) on the ballot below, and mail it in. The ballot is intended to make it easier for you to vote, but if you don't want to cut it out, feel free to copy it. We'll tabulate the votes and let you know how they came out a few issues hence.

Please send your votes to: AnLab, *Analog,* 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10017—and to be sure your vote counts, please mail it in time to reach us by February 1, 1989.

And thank you very much!

—The Editor

ANLAB BALLOT 1988

NOVELLAS & NOVELETTES

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

SHORT STORIES

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

SCIENCE FACT

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

COVER

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

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a calendar of analog upcoming events

2-4 December
TROPICON VII (South Florida SF conference) Guests—Poul Anderson, Walt Willis, Karen Anderson, Madeleine Willis. Registration—$16 until 31 July, more thereafter. Info: SFSFS Secretary, Box 70143, Fort Lauderdale FL 33307.

24-25 December
POLARCON '88 (High Arctic SF conference) at the Workshop. Guest of Honor—K. Kringle, Artist Guest of Honor—Jack Frost, Fan Guest of Honor—Blitzen. Registration—free but limited to good little girls and boys.

13-15 January 1989
ESOTERICON 6 (NYC-area fantasy and occult oriented conference) at Holiday Inn Jetport, Elizabeth, N.J. Info: Esotericon 6, Box 22775, Newark, NJ 07101. (201) 743-7674/672-9244.

20-22 January 1989
CONFUSION 102 (Ann Arbor area SF conference) at Ann Arbor, Mich. Info: AASFA, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI148107.—ICON 13 (Iowa SF conference) at Roadway Inn, Coralville, Ia. Registration—$15 Until 1 January, $18 at the door. Info: ICon 13, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244-0525.

27-29 January 1989
BOSKONE XXVI (New England SF conference) at the Marriott & Sheraton Tara, Springfield, Mass. Guest of Honor—Tim Powers, Official Artist—James Gurney, Special Guest—Tom Whitmore. Registration—$25 until 15 December 1988, $40 at the door. Info: Boskone XXVI, Box G, MIT Branch Post Office, Cambridge MA 02139-0910. (617) 625-2311.

31 August-4 September 1989
NOREASCON III (47th World Science Fiction Convention) at Sheration-Boston Hotel & Hynes Convention Center, Boston, Mass. Guests of Honor—Andre Norton, Ian & Betty Ballantine; Fan Guest of Honor—The Stranger Club (Boston's first SF club). Registration—$60 (adult), $40 (child) to 15 September 1988; $70 (adult), $45 (child) to 15 March 1989; $80 (adult), $50 (child) to 15 July 1989. Supporting—$20 at all times. No advance memberships after 15 July 1989. This is the SF universe's annual get-together. Professionals and readers from all over the world will be in attendance. Talks, panels, films, fancy dress competition, the works. Join now and get to nominate and vote for the Hugo awards and the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer. Info: Noreascon III, Box 46, MIT Branch, Cambridge Ma 02139.

—Anthony Lewis

Items for the Calendar should be sent to the Editorial Offices six months in advance of the event.

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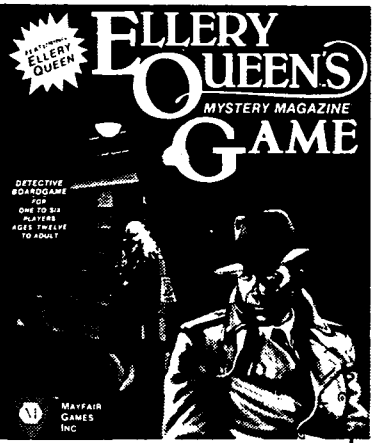
ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE GAME



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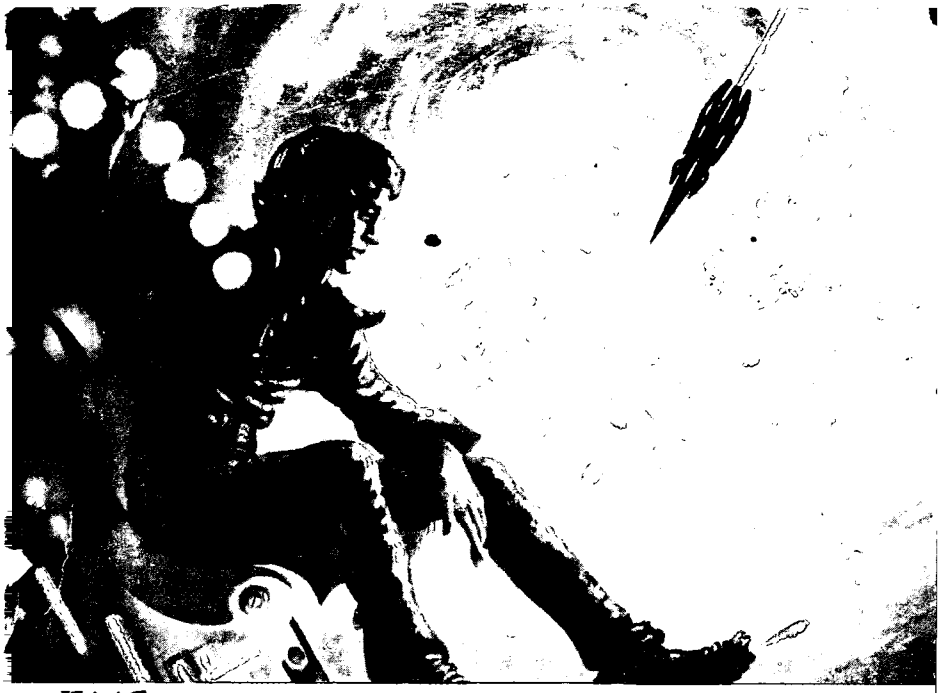

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